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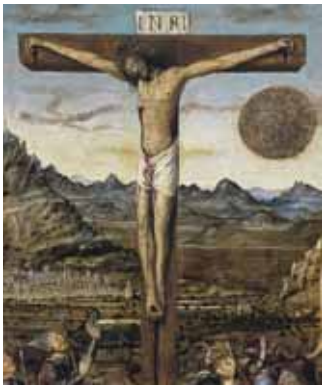

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

COURTESY STAN HUBBARD

WHAT THE PILOT SAW

Welcome to our June issue, in which, among other things, we revisit some of Paul Sieveking's favourite stories from the Noughties, browse Jan Bondeson's collection of unusual *cartes de visite*, visit Blythburgh Church with Tom Hibbert and share Merrily Harpur's recollections of her grandmother's mediumistic abilities.

Our cover story, though, sees the return of Dr David Clarke to these pages as he presents some truly astounding testimony gathered from RAF pilots of the 1950s flying the first generation of British jet fighters. One of them was the late Wing Commander Stanley Hubbard (pictured above), who tells in his own words the story of his two close encounters at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough, Hampshire, and – equally intriguing – the reception of his reports by military officialdom.

ON SALE NOW: THE UFO FILES

Staying with all things ufological, we're pleased to announce the publication of a new FT collection devoted to the subject. Drawing on FT's 50-year archive, *The UFO Files* brings together some of our most fascinating features to provide multiple perspectives on the UFO mystery in its many phases and different guises, from Kenneth Arnold's seminal 1947 sighting (which, thanks to misreporting by the press, gave us the term 'flying saucers') to recent developments like the discovery of the Calvine UFO photo and the new terminology of 'UAP'. Along the way, we look at classic historical cases from Aztec to Rendlesham, examine the sexual undercurrents of the abduction phenomenon, ask whether UFO encounters can have health consequences (sometimes fatal ones) for witnesses and uncover one of the greatest UFO hoaxes ever perpetrated. With contributions from David Clarke, Andy Roberts, Peter Brookesmith, Nick Redfern, John Keeling and others, as well as updates and fresh analysis from our resident saucerians Jenny Randles and Nigel Watson, this should be an essential purchase for ufological newbies and veterans alike. The UFO Files is available in shops, priced £7.49, or online (with a special discount for subscribers) at https://shop.forteantimes.com/product/FRTUFO/the-ufo-files.

ERRATA

FT439:22: Mark Pearson emailed us to point out some confusion in our story about the use of drones in the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. While the report mentioned the 'Baba Yaga' drones supposedly used by Ukrainian forces to swoop over the battlefield and drag off enemy wounded, the caption stated that the drone in the accompanying photo had been shot down by Ukrainian forces; in fact, the picture was taken and posted by Chechen troops who claimed to have brought down a Ukrainian 'Baba Yaga'.

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

SUPERCENTENARIANS

British man takes the title, but women are still way ahead in the oldie stakes

On 2 April John Alfred Tinniswood was declared the world's oldest man at 111 years 220 days of age by Guinness World Records. Tinniswood, who lives in a care home in Southport on Merseyside, has been Britain's oldest man since 2020 and takes the world title after the death of 114-year-old Juan Vicente Pérez from Venezuela. Initially, it was thought that the crown would pass to 112-year-old Gisaburo Sonobe from Japan, but then relatives announced that he had died on 31 March, two days before Pérez, so he missed out. Tinniswood is fairly sanguine about his longevity, saying that his new status "doesn't make any difference, not at all. I accept it for what it is." As is customary for such record holders, he was asked about his secret longevity formula, and refreshingly said that the secret is "pure luck – you either live long or you live short, and you can't do much about it," adding, "I eat what they give me and so does everybody else. I don't have a special diet," although he admits to enjoying a portion of fish and chips every Friday as a treat. Tinniswood does, though, advocate moderation: "If you drink too much or you eat too much or you walk too much; if you do too much of anything, you're going to suffer eventually," he said. Despite his advanced age, Tinniswood is very much in command of all his faculties, getting out of bed unassisted, managing his own finances and avidly keeping up with the news on the radio. Before he retired in 1972, Tinniswood worked in accounts for oil companies Shell and BP, and spent the war in the Army Pay Corp, working on accounting and logistics, which also means he is the world's oldest surviving World War II veteran. The last British record holder for the world's oldest man was Robert Weighton, who took the record in February 2020 and held it for 95 days before dying at 112 years and 60 days in May 2020.

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS

ABOVE: John Alfred Tinniswood, who lives in Merseyside, has been declared the world's oldest man, although at 111 years old he still has a way to go to take the crown of oldest man ever from Jiroemon Kimura (below), who reached 116 years, 54 days.

"You either live long or you live short, and you can't do much about it"

The official oldest man ever is Jiroemon Kimura (1897–2013) of Japan, who lived to the age of 116 years and 54 days. *Birkenhead.news, 5 Apr 2024.*

The men, though, are amateurs in the supercentenarian stakes compared to women. The oldest ever woman whose age could be verified, Jean Calment, allegedly lived to be 122 (although there have been posthumous doubts about this; see **FT376:15**) and all the top 10 living oldest women are older than Tinniswood. Since January 2023 Maria Branyas, from Olot, in Girona, Spain, has been the oldest living woman at 117. She too claims to have no secret formula, saying, "I haven't done anything special to get to this age." When asked, "What do you expect from life?" she replied: "Death". Although fit for her age and not suffering from cancer, dementia or heart problems she says, "I feel like I've lived longer than expected," adding, "Death is like that old friend you know will drop by anytime. I've been ready for a while now, and I think he might come knocking soon. I just want to have the serenity to handle whatever comes my way and enough happiness to savour the good stuff. I'll never turn bitter, no matter what life throws at me." *english.elpais.com, 11 Mar 2024.*

Official record holders like Branyas and Tinniswood, though, need to have their ages verified by documentation such as birth certificates to be accepted by Guinness. This skews the data towards countries with long histories of detailed record keeping. There are, though, persistent claims of far longer lives from people living in places where they do not have the benefit of extensive bureaucracies to confirm their ages. One such

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

THEY DO LIKE IT UP 'EM

A new collection of eye-watering insertions

PAGE 8

THE STREETS RUN RED

Wine flows like water in a Portugese town

PAGE 10

CANADA'S PURPLE HAZE

Weird pink fog descends on British Columbia

PAGE 17

ARXIU DE LA FAMÍLIA BRANYAS MORERA

ABOVE: The world's oldest living woman, Maria Branyas from Girona, Spain, celebrates her 117th birthday; at right she is seen as a child in 1911. **BELOW:** The family of Brazilian José Paulino Gomes claim he died just one week before his 128th birthday.

claim has been made for José Paulino Gomes, a former animal tamer from Corrego del Cafe in Pedra Bonita, Minas Gerais state, Brazil, who, relatives say, was just a week short of his 128th birthday when he died in July last year. If true, he would have lived in three centuries, and through the entirety of the 20th. His family are basing their claim on his 1917 marriage certificate from Pedra Bonita's registry office, which records that Gomez was born on August 4, 1895. Willyan Jose Rodrigues de Souza, his heirs' legal advisor, said: "According to the record, he got married at 22 years old. It is presumed that he was indeed born before 1900. Men rarely got married at 17." His family are hoping that Guinness will be able to confirm their evidence of his age and accept Gomez as the longest-lived person on record. *mirror.co.uk, 1 Aug 2023.*

Although supercentenarians remain rare, centenarians are the fastest-growing demographic group of the world's population; numbers have roughly doubled every 10 years since the 1970s. Using information from a huge dataset collected from the Swedish population, researchers from the Karolinska Institutet in Solna, Sweden, have compared 12 blood-based biomarkers related to inflammation, metabolism, liver and kidney function, as well as potential malnutrition and anæemia, to see if there was a difference between those who lived to over 100 and the rest of the population. They discovered that centenarians tended to have lower levels of glucose, creatinine and uric acid from their 60s onwards and that while most of the median values for the biomarkers showed no significant difference between centenarians and the rest, those for centenarians rarely showed extremely high or low values. All but two of the 12 biomarkers examined showed some connection to the probability of reaching 100, even if the differences were small, suggesting a likely link between metabolic health, nutrition, and exceptional longevity. *sciencealert.com, 10 Oct 2023.*

GOMES FAMILY

For recent coverage of super centenarians, see **FT371:6-7, 383:10-11, 405:10, 409:10, 429:13.**

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SUNDERLAND COUNCIL ASKS DEAD WOMAN TO CLEAR OWN GRAVE

BBC News, 28 Sept 2023.

Graveyards should be "for the living" says bishop

BBC News, 14 Feb 2024.

BRITISH WOMAN MURDERED IN FRANCE AFTER ASKING FOR SELLOTAPE

Independent, 14 Mar 2024

Ex-cop punched inspector he caught having sex with his wife in screwfix car park

news.sky.com, 19 Mar 2024.

MASTURBATING HANDYMAN GETS OFF

Sussex News, 20 Mar 2024

SIDELINES

STUCK WITH IT

Anna Smith-Higgs, 44, a professional burlesque dancer, has a particularly unusual phobia; she is afraid of stickers. Spotting any, particularly on food, makes her shake with fear and she can't eat anything that has had them on, like bananas. "They make me feel sick. It's the nasty sticky stuff on the back," she says. Although rare, her condition does have a name – Pittakionophobia. *Sun, 7 Oct 2023.*

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS…

While staying at the luxury Venetian resort in Las Vegas, Michael Farchi was woken up in the middle of the night in "a lot of pain" which, he said, "felt like somebody stabbing me in my private area." Investigating, Farchi discovered a "scorpion hanging" on his underwear. He was taken to hospital, where he says he was diagnosed as having been "bitten by a scorpion on my groin/testicles" four or five times. Farchi, who is now suing The Venetian, said he "didn't even ask" the hotel how the scorpion got into his room, adding, "It was just under my cover." *huffpost.co.uk, 6 Mar 2024.*

ASHES TO ASHES

Arun crematorium in West Sussex is offering bereaved families the opportunity to have their deceased's ashes pressed into bespoke vinyl records. It is possible to record up to 36 minutes of sound on the discs and to have a unique sleeve made for them. Described as an "audio visual memento", the website for the service suggests: "Record a personal message, your last will and testament, your own soundtrack or just the sound of silence to hear your pops and crackles for the minimal approach." Other services offered by the crematorium include the option to send ashes into space or to have them made into jewellery. *BBC News, 23 Jan 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

PECULIAR PLANTS | Leaning pines, a shroom-sprouting frog and an ecosexual tree-hugger

STEVE LENNIE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Cook's Pine Avenue, Peradeniya Botanic Gardens, Sri Lanka, with trees leaning towards the Equator. **BELOW**: A golden-backed frog with a mushroom sprouting from its side, apparently the first documented case of such a phenomenon.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE LEAN-SOME PINE

Cook's pine (*Araucaria columnaris*) is a conifer native to New Caledonia in the Pacific islands but has been planted across the world as an ornamental species. Wherever it is found, though, it never seems to grow vertically. Matt Ritter, director at Cal Poly Plant Conservatory in California says, "When grown outside of its native range, this species has a pronounced lean so ubiquitous that it is often used as the identifying characteristic for the species." Researching the pines, Ritter found that all the specimens he was studying seemed to lean in the same direction, towards the south, so he and his team of researchers investigated further. Measuring 256 trees across five continents on a range of latitudes, they found that wherever they were, the trees leaned towards the Equator: in the northern hemisphere they leant towards the south, and in the southern hemisphere, towards the north. The researchers found that on average, the pines lean 8.05 degrees toward the Equator,

Wherever they were, the trees leaned towards the Equator

but the lean became more pronounced with distance from the Equator, and that only nine per cent of trees did not have the predicted lean. The direction in which a plant grows is largely dependent on environmental factors like the direction of the sunlight, wind, surrounding vegetation and gravity, and Cook's pines are the only plants so far discovered that consistently lean in a geographical direction. "The plants are responding to their global environment in a way not yet fully understood," says Ritter. *iflscience.com, 20 Apr 2023.*

FROGSTOOL

Amphibian researchers Chinmay Maliye and Lohit YT, working in India, made a startling discovery when they stopped to examine a colony of Rao's intermediate golden-backed frog (*Hylarana intermedia*), in a roadside puddle. Looking at the small yellow frogs, they noticed that: "One individual perched on a twig had a distinct outgrowth on its left flank. A closer examination clearly revealed a mushroom sprouting from its side. To the

LOHIT YT

DAVID NUGENT-MALONE

LEFT: The forest floor lifts in woods near Mugdock, Stirlingshire, giving David Nugent-Malone's dog a bit of a fright. **BELOW:** The Earth moves, too, for "ecosexual" Sonja Semyonova when she encounters her favourite tree.

best of our knowledge, never has a mushroom sprouting from the flank of a live frog been documented." As they did not collect the frog for further study, they concluded "no prognosis is possible." It was, however, possible to identify the mushroom as a member of the *Mycena* genus, a type of bonnet mushroom. "This is truly remarkable," said ecologist Nancy Karraker. "The closest I have gotten is finding ticks on frogs in Panama and seeing a juvenile red-backed salamander inside of the hollow stipe of a mushroom, presumably hunting insects." However, she added, "It is hard to understand what is going on here without the identification of this mushroom to species, as some *Mycena* 'feed' on live wood, some on rotting wood, some on animal dung, some on decaying leaf litter, and none of these things relate to the flank of a live frog." Mycologist Christoffer Bugge Harder from the University of Copenhagen said, "I would guess that this is a purely superficial skin infection with *Mycena*; those can be sustained over a long time, as are most fungal skin infections in humans." *Forbes.com, 8 Feb 2024.*

"BREATHING" FOREST

As Storm Babet swept across Scotland in October, walker David Nugent-Malone and his dog Jake had a startling experience. As they followed their regular route through woods near Mugdock, Stirlingshire, they entered a pocket that seemed to "focus the wind to allow it to lift up the woodland floor", causing the meshed together tree roots and vegetation to lift like a "muddy tablecloth". The video Nugent-Malone shot of the phenomenon shows the ground undulating, rising and falling as if it were a breathing mossy carpet, and he can be heard saying, "The woods were moving like the sea this morning." *BBC News, 21 Oct 2023. (watch the video footage for the full increfdiblke eddect: https://www.tiktok.com/@mrlukus_/video/7293083106595179809)*

TREE HUGGERS

Sonja Semyonova, 45, from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, who describes her profession as "self-intimacy guide", has announced that she is "ecosexual" and in an "erotic" relationship with an oak tree. Taking regular walks past the tree during lockdown, Semyonova said, "I was walking a path near the tree five days a week for the whole winter. I noticed a connection with the tree," adding, "The presence I feel with the tree is what I'm looking for, but that's a fantasy with a person, the feeling of being tiny and supported by something so solid. The feeling of not being able to fall." She feels the tree fills a void in her life. "I had been craving that rush of erotic energy that comes when you meet a new partner and that is not sustainable," she explained, but she feels that this is possible with the tree. Semyonova does, however, want to make it clear that she does not get physical with the oak, saying, "There are similarities between sex with people and the eroticism ecosexuals feel with nature, but they're not the same." She believes everyone has an ecosexual side, and that if we recognised it, this would solve the climate crisis.

While possibly not at the level of ecosexuality, tennis champion Novak Djokovic raised eyebrows in January by admitting that he has a "special relationship" with a tree in the botanic gardens in Melbourne, Australia. Djokovic says "There's one particular tree that I've been having [a] special relationship with, so to say, in the last 15 years. I got connected with that tree." He claims the tree, the exact location of which he has not revealed, helps him feel grounded, and says he always tries to spend time with it when he is in Australia. *dailymail.co.uk, 26 Dec 2023; theguardian.com, 18 Jan 2024.*

SONJA SEMYONOVA

SIDELINES

ARRRR!

62-year-old Mark Uterstaedt of Ledyard, Connecticut, was found digging up a neighbour's yard with a rock rake and, when asked to leave, yelled at them. He allegedly claimed that he owned the neighbourhood and that they "were pirates", brandishing the rake in a threatening manner. Uterstaedt insisted to police that he was digging up the yard because he thought his neighbours had installed an illegal water line but was still arrested on an assortment of charges. *wsaz.com, 17 Jan 2024.*

SEEING A MAN ABOUT A DOG

A man in Ireland was found to have breached a safety order that required him not to communicate with his ex-wife after he took to sending letters to the couple's dog, living at her house. The judge said, "I am not at all satisfied those letters should have been sent," while the man insisted "the dog is my dog as well as my ex-wife's." However, the judge pointed out that as the dog could not read, his ex-wife would have to read the letters for it, and that could be seen as intimidatory.

A LIVE ONE

Police in Melbourne, Australia, tracking a man who had started a dozen small fires across the south-east of the city, eventually caught the alleged firebug after he set blazes in a loading dock, behind a school, in a shop car park, outside an estate agent's office and in several bins. On searching him after arrest, officers found two live ducklings in his pants and added animal cruelty to his arson-related charges. *theguardian.com, 20 Aug 2023.*

HOSE BEASTS

Alerted by his strange behaviour and the wriggling bulges in his trousers, customs officers at Thailand's Suvarnabhumi Airport detained a 22-year-old Taiwanese man trying to board a flight to Taipei. Searching him, they found he had two otters and a prairie dog concealed in his underwear. He had slipped the animals into a pair of pantyhose, which he then bound to his waist with packing tape. Customs turned the creatures over to wildlife officials and charged the man with animal trafficking. taiwannews.com, 10 Dec 2023.

SIDELINES...

HANDY GRENADE

Called to Patton Middle School in McMinnville, Oregon, police took no chances investigating an "item of concern" found near the school running track. Pupils were kept in the school buildings, the bomb squad was called, and a drone was sent in to photograph the item. A statement issued later said "After reviewing the photographs, the item was determined to be a dog waste bag dispenser that is manufactured to resemble a hand grenade", and the school was allowed to resume normal activities. *upi.com, 22 Dec 2023.*

NOT FINE

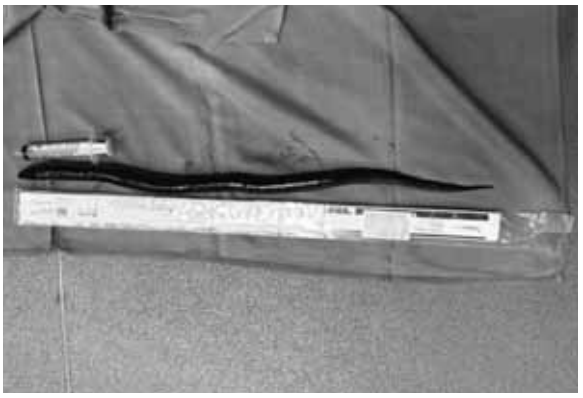
Rob Richards from Birmingham cannot drive, but this has not prevented him being deluged with motoring fines. Parking charges, speeding fines, car hire bills and Dartford Crossing tolls have all been sent to his home in Quinton and he has been besieged by bailiffs demanding payment, although he has never held a driving licence. "It is annoying and it's a nuisance," says Richards. "If these companies put as much effort as chasing me into resolving the issues, it would be sorted in a few days." *BBC News, 1 Feb 2024*.

BAD BIN DAY

A 60-year-old woman living in a housing complex in Manchester, New Hampshire, fell into the skip at her housing complex on bin day and could not get out. Before anyone realised she was in there, the bin lorry scooped her up along with the rest of the contents and dumped her in the back. She was compacted four times before the driver noticed. "All you heard was screaming," said neighbour Amanda Czzowitz. The woman was rescued with serious injuries, but was expected to survive. "That was definitely one for the books," said Fire Chief Bob Beaudet. *thedailybeast.com, 30 Jan 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

INFELICITOUS INSERTIONS | Will they never learn?



ABOVE LEFT: The foot-long eel that had somehow found its way up a Vietnamese man's bottom. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The WWI artillery shell removed from the anus of an 88-year-old Frenchman; thankfully, it was a "collector's item" rather than a live munition.

EEL-IAN INVASION

On 20 March a man arrived at the Hai Ha District Medical Centre in Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam, with extreme abdominal pain. X-rays and ultrasound scans showed that there was an unidentified foreign body in his abdominal cavity and that he was suffering from intestinal perforation. Given the pain the man was in, medics decided to operate immediately and on opening the patient up were startled to find that the foreign body was a 30cm (1ft) eel, and that it was still alive. They extracted the wriggling creature, then removed the damaged portion of his intestine, creating a stoma, and stabilised the patient, leaving him with only mild abdominal discomfort. The doctors believed that the eel had crawled up the patient's intestine from his anus and had got into his abdominal cavity by biting through his intestine. The patient could not, however, provide a clear answer as to exactly how an eel might have got up his bottom, and the hospital was far too professional to speculate. *nguoiduatin.vn, 21 Mar 2024.*

THIS IS A THING?

The Hospital Sainte Musse in Toulon, France, had to be partially evacuated when an 88-year-old man arrived with a World War I artillery shell jammed in his anus. "An emergency occurred… that required the intervention of bomb disposal personnel, the evacuation of adult and pædiatric emergencies as well as the diversion of incoming emergencies," a hospital spokesperson said. "We had to manage the risk in a reactive framework." Once the bomb disposal crew had checked the unfortunately placed munition and decided it was unlikely to explode in the patient, they advised the hospital that it was safe to operate. "They reassured us by telling us that it was a collector's item from the First World War, used by the French military," said the spokesperson. Doctors then went ahead and removed the eight inch by two inch (20cm by 5cm) shell, which the patient claimed to have accidentally sat on while gardening. "An apple, a mango, or even a can of shaving foam; we are used to finding unusual objects inserted where they shouldn't be," said one of the doctors involved. "But a shell? Never!". However, we have previously noted a case in Gloucestershire in 2021 when a man turned up at a hospital with a live anti-tank round jammed in his rectum, requiring surgical removal (**FT416:7**). *nypost.com, 20 Dec 2022.*

He claimed to have sat sat on it accidentally while gardening

ANTIQUE EXCITEMENT

Antique dealers in Houston, Texas, were horrified as news spread through their community of a heavily built man in a kilt visiting antique stores and furtively inserting items from their displays into his anus before returning them to the shelves. After catching him in the act on CCTV Susan Golden, manager of The Antique Gallery, said, "I had to watch it a couple of times to be sure I knew what I was looking at." She had seen the man in the shop on several previous occasions, loitering for hours without making purchases, but this was the first time she realised what he had been doing, having seen him pick up a makeup brush and another piece, "shove both items up his anus, then return the items to the shelf". He was later spotted at another Houston antique shop behaving in the same way. Once his description was circulated, dealers as far away as Galveston and Tomball recognised the man as someone they had seen lurking in their shops and he was swiftly identified as Mitchell C Vest, 60, and arrested. Vest was charged with criminal mischief for his behaviour with a variety of antiques, including a "Restoration hardware piece", an antique bottle opener and a "tobacco tent can", which, his arrest affidavit states, had to be thrown throw away "due to fæces (being) on them". Police were seeking a woman believed to be Vest's accomplice. *dailymail.co.uk, 19 Feb 2024.*

ABOVE: Mitchell C Vest, the Houston Antique Enema Bandit. BELOW: Sex therapist Dr Eric Sprankle, expert on odd insertions.

PENILE BATTERY

In Australia, a 73-year-old man needed urgent surgery after inserting three button batteries into his urethra, earning himself a paper in the journal *Urology Case Reports* entitled "A Button in my Benjamin". The patient had previously pushed batteries up his urethra several times before without incident, but this time had been unable to remove them, and after waiting for 24 hours in the hope that they'd come out naturally, went to hospital. There, doctors acted immediately to extract the batteries as they are corrosive and can cause tissue necrosis in just two hours; they also feared Fournier gangrene, a rare but deadly infection of the genitals. After attempting to coax the batteries out by various methods, doctors eventually removed them with forceps, finding them to be "coated with black tar-like material". Sent home with antibiotics, the man returned 10 days later suffering from swelling and discharge and was found to be suffering from an "extensive degree of necrosis". This required the removal of part of his urethra, and, given the extent of the damage and the complexity of the surgery required, doctors "decided that the best option would be for no further penile reconstruction", leaving the man with severely mangled genitals. *nypost.com, 15 Feb; Urology Case Reports, Mar 2024.*

BY THE BOOK

Sex therapist Dr Eric Sprankle has taken a particular interest in

bizarre insertions, documenting many in his book *DIY: The Wonderfully Weird History and Science of Masturbation*, in which he notes that 10 Americans visit hospitals every day needing something they have inserted removed from their rectum. "One ER physician in 2022 reported removing 20 Happy Meal toys from a middle-aged man's anus, which gives a new meaning to the McDonald's slogan, 'I'm lovin' it'," reports Sprankle in the book. He also recounts a case in China in 2020 where a man had a large fish, a blue tilapia, which are usually 12 to 16 inches (30-40cm) in length, removed from his rectum. It had, according to the patient, slipped in there when he accidentally sat on it while it was still alive. During his research, Sprankle says he found reports of "pretty much everything that was on your sister's wedding registry... in a man's rectum." He did not stop there, though, and turned up many startling urethral insertions as well. These included a 47-year-old German man who had been sexually aroused by maggots from an early age and would gain pleasure from inserting them into his urethra while masturbating, something which he did with increasing frequency as he got older. However, eventually one of the maggots he inserted did not emerge when he ejaculated, requiring surgical removal. "Fortunately," writes Sprankle, "the man survived the ordeal, but now has to live with the embarrassment of knowing his fetishistic escapade is written about in the academic journal *The Urologist*." He also found a South African case where a 27-year-old man turned up at hospital with a plastic knife in his urethra, but, according to Sprankle, "Despite evidence to the contrary, the patient emphatically denied inserting any foreign body into his urethra" and when asked about how it had ended up there, he would only say "I had sex". Sprankle found that only about half the cases of foreign body insertions were done for sexual purposes. The other half were done for a variety of reasons – borderline personality disorder, suicide attempts, psychosis, depression, factitious disorder, malingering, cognitive disorders including dementia and delirium, treatment of constipation and hæmorrhoids, concealment, attention-seeking behaviour, "accidental" assault, and "the consequences of drunken wagers". "Masturbate safely," Sprankle concludes. "No one wants to find themselves the subject of a medical case study". *dailymail.co.uk, 20 Mar 2024.*

SIDELINES...

MISSED MISSILE

The National Museum of the US Air Force near Dayton, Ohio, called the police after being offered a surprising donation. A man in, Bellvue, Washington State, had offered them a nuclear missile that he had in his garage. The bomb squad paid the man a visit and discovered it was "in fact a Douglas AIR-2 Genie, an unguided air-to-air rocket that is designed to carry a 1.5 kt W25 nuclear warhead", which, fortunately, was missing. It was "just basically a gas tank for rocket fuel," they reported. The owner had bought the missile in a garage sale and was "extremely irritated" by all the attention it had generated. *BBC News, 3 Feb 2024.*

HAMMASSIVE MISTAKE

Following the attack on Israel by Hamas forces, police in Valence, France, raided a taco shop after receiving reports that the restaurant had a sign demonstrating support for the Palestinian terrorist group. What they found was a shop named "Chamas Taco" with a faulty neon sign that meant that the "C" was not illuminated, but they still insisted that the owner turned the whole sign off and not switch it on again until the C was fixed. *tellereport.com, 19 Oct 2023.*

SMART BOY!

British Transport Police attending an incident near Wolverhampton railway station arrested a man and took his dog into care after he was found to be too drunk to look after it. He was also unable to explain why the dog was dressed in a neat buttoned up blue denim shirt, but a picture of him wearing it posted on the police social media accounts swiftly went viral. *D.Mail, 24 Aug 2023.*

CRUCI-FIX

After Bernard Denis, 69, Mayor of Saint-Come-du-Mont in Normandy, France, was found in a field blindfolded and with nails hammered through his hands and feet in what appeared to be an attempt to crucify him, suspicion fell on his hard right political opponents. Denis had already claimed they had made death threats, shot at his van, and carried out an arson attack that destroyed two of his cars. Police investigations, though, could find no leads for any of these crimes, and they now believed Denis faked all of them to frame opponents and have charged him with "denouncing an imaginary crime". *D.Telegraph, 7 Sept 2023.*

SIDELINES...

GONE NUTS

While it was briefly left unattended at a service station in Newcastle, New South Wales, at about 4am, a delivery van containing 10,000 Krispy Kreme doughnuts was stolen. The thief was described as "of Aboriginal appearance, in her early 30s, wearing dark clothing and carrying a white handbag", but despite witnesses getting a clear view of her, and the prominent appearance of the van, no trace of either was found and Krispy Kreme had to run extra shifts to replace the missing doughnuts for their outlets. *Courier-Mail (Queensland), 30 Nov 2023.*

SILENT TREATMENT

In December, David Hampson, 53, was sentenced to six months in prison for obstructing the highway, his 10th sentence on this charge. Hampson was arrested for standing in the road and blocking traffic in Swansea city centre until police arrived and removed him. When they did, he refused to speak to them to explain his actions and continued to remain silent in court. Each time he is released from prison, Hampson immediately repeats his offence and is rearrested. He has always refused to speak to officials so no one has any idea why he is doing this. *Sun, 12 Dec 2023.*

TELEPORTATION?

Research has shown that up to 300,000 pet fish a year vanish from their tanks without trace, with many aquarium owners reporting finding that one or more of their fish had just "gone". Some suspect their cat has eaten them, or they have jumped out the tank or got stuck in the filter, but many carry out extensive, fruitless, searches for their pets. Fish expert Colin Bell, 45, says "sometimes fish vanish without explanation, every experienced fish owner knows that." *D.Star, 22 Mar 2023.*

PAINTING THE TOWN RED

Wine flows like water in Portugal

The famed London Beer Flood of 1814 (**FT312:67**) and the legendary Boston Molasses Flood of 1919 (**FT359:8-9**) have now been joined by the São Laurenco do Barrio wine flood of 2023. After two tanks at the Levira Distillery in São Laurenco do Barrio in Portugal unexpectedly gave way last September, 2.2 million litres of red wine, enough to fill almost three million bottles, surged through the town streets. Fortunately, the fire department was able to avoid it contaminating the local river by diverting the flow into a nearby field, and, unlike in the other two floods, there were no casualties. *D.Mail, 12 Sept 2023.*

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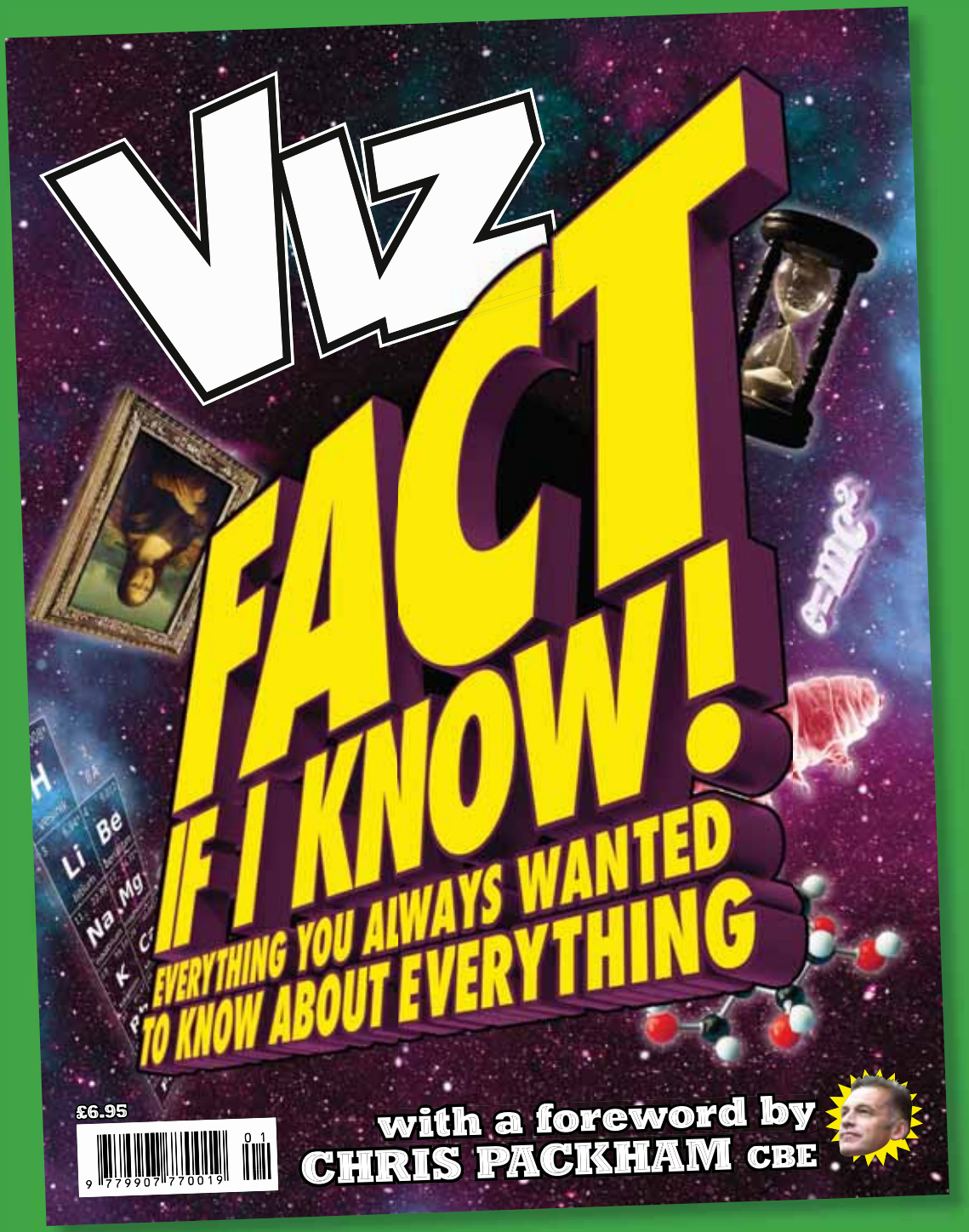

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ECLIPSE vs APOCALYPSE

Despite various portents of doom, the 2024 solar eclipse passed uneventfully

On 8 April a major solar eclipse crossed North America, with a path of totality, where the Moon completely blocks out the Sun, 123 miles (198km) wide. This made landfall at Mazatlán, Mexico, then swept along a 4,000-mile (6,500km) arc to Newfoundland in Canada with the length of totality at its longest point being four minutes and 28 seconds; coincidentally almost exactly the same length as Bonnie Tyler's classic song *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. A partial eclipse could be seen across most of North America and as far away as western Scotland.

While eclipses are regular and entirely predictable occurrences across the planet, taking place somewhere roughly every 18 months, US-centric commentators got more than usually exercised by this one. In the weeks running up to the event, social media channels used by right wing conspiracy promoters were full of dire predictions about what the eclipse would bring. Trump's disgraced former national security advisor Michael Flynn made ominous noises about unspecified "elites" using it as an excuse to impose equally unspecified "new controls" on the population, while Infowars' Alex Jones claimed knowledge of "Major Events Surrounding the April 8th Solar Eclipse, masonic rituals planned worldwide to usher in New World Order". Even the US authorities were not immune; emergency management authorities in Lorain County, Ohio, recommended that residents stock up on food, water and fuel before this event, as if it were a hurricane rather than an eclipse, while several states issued warnings about loss of phone coverage and electrical outages. There was a certain amount of truth to these; phone systems risked being overloaded by large numbers of viewers sending messages, photos and videos of the eclipse, which could cause networks to collapse, and the idea of electrical outages resulted from a misunderstood warning that anything reliant on solar power might briefly lose energy as it went dark. Neither would have been directly caused by the eclipse itself, though, which was not made clear. Word of the extra police and National Guard being deployed to manage tourist influxes also set off conspiracists, with commenters saying, "I think [it's] another test, see how many follow orders and how close they are to declare martial law without a fight," and, "Kinda convenient if you want to declare martial law and unleash a dictatorship before Trump can win in November." David Straight, a leading light in the alternative law "Sovereign Citizen" movement, also claimed that the Government was going to use the darkness of the eclipse to carry out "Operation Balloon", which supposedly involved using a mass balloon release to drop poison gas on the population, although it was not clear why eclipse darkness was better than the usual kind for this.

J MARSHALL / TRIBALEYE IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

NASA

"God is sending America strong signs to tell us to repent"

Evangelical Christians also got very excited about the eclipse (see **FT443:49**). They roped in international events to make the case that the apocalypse and or/rapture were nigh. The coincidental restart of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, scheduled to take place on 8 April after two years of maintenance and upgrades, was thought to be important, indicating it would be used to open a portal for demons. The imminent sacrifice of red heifers in Israel, which is supposed to usher in the return of the messiah and/or the end of the world (**FT444:25**), was also deemed significant, with a popular right wing evangelical Telegram channel claiming, "Red Heifers from Texas have arrived in Israel where they will be sacrificed during the Solar Eclipse. At the same time, CERN will be opening up demonic portals." NASA didn't entirely help by launching three satellites to study the atmosphere during the eclipse called the Atmospheric Perturbations around Eclipse Path (APEP) mission. Apep turns out to also be an ancient Egyptian snake god of darkness and destruction, which resulted in the satellites being linked to the CERN "demonic portal" narrative, along with the fact that Comet 12P/Pons-Brooks, also known as "the Devil Comet", was close to the Sun during the eclipse period. This was visible during the totality to people using binoculars or telescopes where skies were very clear.

By plotting the path of the 2024 eclipse over that of one that crossed the US east to west in 2017, some conspiracy-mongers predicted that a "mass human sacrifice" was going to take place on the New Madrid fault line near St Louis. Apparently the two are linked because of the

LEFT: The total solar eclipse seen from Indianapolis, Indiana. **BELOW LEFT:** The paths of the 2017 and 2024 eclipses.

biblically resonant seven years between them. "If something were to trigger that fault line, something man-made they could make look completely natural, it could mean a serious loss of life disaster for the US; an earthquake on the New Madrid Fault Line could be up to 20 times larger than an earthquake with a SoCal epicentre," said one believer. The idea that eclipses and earthquakes are linked goes back to ancient mythology, but there is no evidence that this is the case. This did not stop Tennessee evangelist Perry Stone claiming Jesus was specifically referring to 2024 in Bible verses; he talked about earthquakes, famine, pestilence and signs from Heaven, and the whole idea got a major boost when a small earthquake in New Jersey shook New York on 5 April. Some extreme evangelicals even managed to rope in the rare simultaneous emergence of two cicada broods to claim that darkness, earthquakes and a "plague of locusts" definitely meant it was apocalypse time. Noted MAGA senator and conspiracy theorist Marjorie Taylor Greene took to social media to claim: "God is sending America strong signs to tell us to repent. Earthquakes and eclipses and many more things to come, I pray that our country listens." The idea of impending apocalypse was also promoted by Alex Jones's Infowars. This, he claimed, was signalled by the path of totality covering seven cities called Nineveh. These are named after Nineveh in Iraq, which the Bible describes as "evil" and says that God had it pencilled in for destruction until Jonah (of whale fame) got its inhabitants to repent. This idea was supposed to be confirmed by the fact that the eclipse also passed over Jonah, Texas. In fact, investigation shows the totality only passed over two Ninevehs; the claim of seven was most likely made because of its biblical significance – there was no chance of the eclipse actually passing over seven cities named Nineveh, because there are only six places called Nineveh in the US and not all are cities. However, some commenters built on this idea by suggesting that the "X" of the eclipse paths crossed at the portentously named Rapture, Illinois. This is a real, if tiny, settlement, but it wasn't where the totalities crossed: that was outside Carbondale, Illinois. The website *Christianity Today* summed it all up, saying: "Some in the US are anticipating a great Day of Judgment complete with terrorist attacks, biological warfare and nuclear meltdowns. According to alt-right conspiracy theorists, including some fringe evangelical leaders, this war will usher in a new world order in which Christ will return and America (alongside Israel) will rule the nations."

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ABOVE: Residents of Carbondale, Illinois, watch the eclipse on 8 April 2024.

When the time came, though, the US remained conspicuously apocalypse-free and while some areas had cloud, the weather mostly remained clear enough for everyone to get the view they hoped for. There was an increase in traffic accidents along the totality, caused by hordes of tourists crowding into the area, and hospitals reported an increase in visitors to A&E with eye injuries caused by looking at the Sun without safety glasses. It also proved possible to track the path of the totality on a map by looking at places where Airbnbs were 100 per cent booked by enthusiastic eclipse viewers. In Texas, giraffes, zebras, and ostriches in Dallas Zoo were filmed panicking and running for cover as the totality passed over. The *Daily Mail* reported that use of the popular pornography site *Pornhub* fell, on average, by 68 per cent for about an hour in areas that the eclipse passed over, but that searches for terms like "eclipse porn" and "eclipse sex" rose by 6,800 per cent in the days around the event, although there was no relevant content available to satisfy searchers. These might have done better tuning into Mexican media outlet RCG Media's 24/7 news programme, which aired videos of the eclipse sent in by viewers and accidentally showed one where the Sun was being eclipsed by a man's testicles instead of the Moon.

All the conspiracising around the eclipse did most likely contribute to one small apocalypse, however. In Los Angeles, Dianne Johnson, an astrologer going by the name Ayoka, stabbed her partner Jaelen Chaney, 29, to death on 8 April. After killing Chaney, she fled with her two small children, whom she then threw from a moving SUV onto the freeway, killing her infant daughter and seriously injuring her nine-year-old, before killing herself by driving the vehicle into a tree at over 100 mph (160km/h). Although police are not specifically linking the deaths to the eclipse, Ayoka's frequent and disturbing postings associating it with the apocalypse had increasingly taken over from her usual mix of astrology, positive affirmations, antisemitic screeds and vaccine conspiracy posts as 8 April approached. Among her posts was one where she described the solar eclipse as "the epitome of spiritual warfare" and another saying "Wake up wake up the apocalypse is here. Everyone who has ears listen. Your time to choose what you believe is now." *yourweather.co.uk, 30 Mar; snopes.com, 31 Mar; sharonhill.com, 31 Mar; iflscience.com, 4 Apr; wired.com, 5 Apr; boingboing.net, 5 Apr; dailymail.co.uk, 8 Apr; nme.com, 10 Apr; nbcnews.com 11 Apr 2024.*

PAUL DEVEREUX uncovers new Pompeii frescoes, gruesome Neolithic deaths and a toilet imp

ITALIAN MINISTRY OF CULTURE

TRACY AND RORY VORSTER

ABOVE LEFT: One of the newly discovered frescos in Pompeii, depicting Apollo and Cassandra. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The ancient stone drain found beneath panelling in the Vorsters' bathroom. **BELOW:** The Lincoln Imp in Lincoln Cathedral

DEEP WITHIN THE ASHES

Pompeii in Italy was, of course, destroyed in AD 79 by being buried in the volcanic ashes issuing from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. If, like this columnist, you assumed the whole site of Pompeii had been fully archæologically explored, you would be mistaken – it seems there is still a third of the area to be excavated and studied. The one 'virtue' of the ash, though, is that it preserved everything it smothered. One of the most recent finds is a 49ft (15m) long by 20ft (6m) wide banquet hall, uncovered towards the end of 2023. It has now been found to contain on its high blackened walls truly remarkable frescos depicting mythological figures that would have formed a fitting backdrop to an elegant soiree. (The blackened background would likely have caused the figures to stand out even more startlingly in the flickering light of oil lamps.) This exceptional discovery has rightly created much excitement among researchers and the public in general. The fresco pictured here shows Apollo (with his lyre) having a bit of an argument with the seeress Cassandra, seated (in this columnist's opinion) on an omphalos ('World Navel') stone. *Washington Post, 12 April; BBC News, 11 April 2024.*

NEOLITHIC NASTINESS

Here's an archæological example of just how nasty human nature has sometimes been in antiquity (nothing changes it seems). It is indicated by a recent study of a tomb dated to about 5,400 BC, at Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux near Avignon, France. It contained the skeletons of three women, two of whom were seemingly killed by *incaprettamento*, a method in which their necks were tied to their legs bent behind their backs, so that they effectively strangled themselves, and then buried while still alive. They are assumed to have been sacrificial victims related to some agricultural ritual because of the symbolism of the tomb: it mimics the look of a grain silo, it originally had a wooden structure over it angled to align to the solar solstices, and there were broken grinding stones nearby. Perhaps the most disturbing archæological finding is that about a dozen such killings across Neolithic Europe have now been identified, spanning some 2,000 years. *Live Science, 10 April. Original study: Science Advances, 10 April 2024, vol.10, issue 15. DOI:10.1126/sciadv.adl3374.*

AN IMP IN THE LOO

This column has sometimes been known to sink to lavatorial levels (**FT441:12**) in the search for archæological news, and this time it is to Lincoln we go – to be precise, to the home of Tracy and Rory Vorster, located near the Cathedral. When they removed a wooden panel in their bathroom the Vorsters found a large stone slab beneath it which displayed the 14th century carving of a grotesque face on its surface. Its mouth turned out to be a mediæval drain. The face has been identified as a representation of the 'Lincoln Imp'.

The actual 'Lincoln Imp' is a carved stone grotesque figure, stocky and hair-covered, with cow ears and horns and taloned hands, located atop a pillar overlooking Lincoln Cathedral's Angel Choir. Thought to date to the 13th century, it is only about a foot (30cm) tall, but has long been adopted by the city as a kind of unofficial mascot. The main legend associated with it states that Satan sent it and an imp friend to the Cathedral to cause havoc, which they set about with enthusiasm like supernatural hooligans or, as we might say today, like poltergeists. So troublesome did the imps become that the angelic riot squad had to be deployed, resulting in this imp being turned to stone and fixed in its current position (for more, see **FT332:72-75**, **416:45**). *BBC News, 16 April; Arkeonews, 26 April 2024.*

THE FLASHER ON GIANT HILL

A secure date for Dorset's Cerne Abbas Giant hill figure (see **FT385:4+6-7**, **406:4**) has finally been established. It has long been argued that the 55m (180ft) tall chalk figure on the slopes of Giant Hill is Bronze Age or Iron Age, or Roman, or mediæval or only a couple of hundred years old. Now, an important article in the May/June 2024 edition of *British Archaeology* (pp.16-25) announces the results of a detailed and complex project involving scientific, environmental and geo-archæological input by a team of expert archæologists with the National Trust that settles the matter: the original Giant dates to the early mediæval (Saxon) era, 10th century or possibly a few centuries earlier. The original Giant was trenched rather than outlined in chalk as is the later version of the Giant today. There is much more detailed information in the article.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

297: TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE EARTH

(Apologies to Bonnie Tyler for titular mangling)

Fort has countless references to solar and other eclipses; see especially pages 822-5 for a semi-serious discussion of ecliptic predictions.

Alas, no sign of the 2024 celestial wonder in these parts [Alberta]. Had to make do with witnessing it on the box, wincing at the absurd tag 'Path of Totality' applied to viewing spots across North America.

I wrote up the 1999 one for the *Morning Star* (Thursday, 19 August), hence some self-plagiarism here.

Shan't be around for the next big one. As Lucy once observed to Linus in 'Peanuts', "You wouldn't think it would be that hard to get a booking for an eclipse."

They've been making the headlines for a very long time, if Homer's mention of the Sun vanishing from the sky in his *Odyssey* can be taken as a reference point.

In his essay on the Moon, Plutarch rounds up early Greek poetic mentions of eclipses, one of which we can date to 6 April 647 BC.

Herodotus has a good yarn about Thales, the first Greek philosopher-scientist, said to have predicted the eclipse of 28 May 585 BC which terrorised the Lydians and Medes into breaking off their local civil war – would that this latest one had the same effect in Gaza…

Thales was also the original absent-minded professor. Absorbed in thought, he once fell down a well. Many doubt he could have accurately predicted or explained a solar eclipse, though he might have learned something from the lunar-solar records kept by the Babylonians from 721 BC, even if their astronomers did babble on about religious causes.

He was, though, doubly lucky. The eclipse happened on the day of battle and was visible in that precise region.

The one on 30 April 462 BC provided Pindar with a poetic theme. Though they are not disasters, eclipses (and comets) understandably terrified many ancients as harbingers of evil.

By the late fifth century BC, without the aid of telescopes, various Greek scientists had come up with the correct explanation of eclipses.

Significantly, perhaps, Anaxagoras, the leader of this astronomical pack, was convicted at Athens of 'impiety'.

His contemporary, Thucydides, puffing his own *History of the Peloponnesian War*, says that the era saw more eclipses than any previous time, though in fact he only mentions two, with no hint of popular panics.

Roman polymath Pliny the Elder was fully aware of ecliptic causes and quite understood why they were visible in some places and not in others, though he still wobbled towards the old idea that they signalled great events.

It's hardly surprising that the New Testament would want to phenomenalise the Crucifixion. Yet, of the four Gospels, only Luke comes up with a solar event. Matthew and Mark equip it with an earthquake, whilst John has no marvels at all.

Regarding the "Darkness which fell over the Earth from the sixth to the ninth hour", no solar eclipse lasts anywhere that long. Yesterday's (8 April 2024) lasted around four minutes. Perhaps we might combine the darkening build-up with a natural tendency to exaggerate to lend some plausibility.

The ostensibly pious Byzantines incorporated Luke's version into their Christian art, depicting Sun and Moon with averted faces.

Like their predecessors, the Byzantines wobbled between science and superstition. A number of eclipses were predicted and recorded; so were some mass panics.

A couple of agreeable stories. The historian George Acropolites records a court discussion of eclipses in 1238 – one doubts such seminars occur at Buck House – in which his own academic dronings were cut short by the empress calling him a 'Moron' – touch of Prince Philip about that, one has to say.

Then there's the prediction of an eclipse on 1 August AD 1087, as related by Princess Anna Comnena in her biography of royal father Alexius I. While negotiating with the enemy Pechenegs, who were steppe-dwelling between the rivers Dnieper and Don, he was surreptitiously tipped off by an underling that an eclipse was imminent. How this minion knew is left unexplained.

Alexius passed this on to the enemy spokesman, staking the outcome and his reputation on its truth. When the Sun went dark, the enemy caved in – what would Netanyahu or Putin give for such a PR coup…?

Historian Leo the Deacon offers this description of a pre-Christmas eclipse on 22 December 968:

"While the emperor was engaged in Syria, about the time of the winter solstice, a solar eclipse took place, unprecedented in its magnitude except for the one that occurred when in their madness the Jews nailed Christ, the Creator of all things, to the Cross. The nature of the eclipse was as follows. On the twenty-second of December. at about the fourth hour, in calm, clear weather darkness covered the Earth. The disc was black and unlighted and a dim circle like a headband illuminated its edge. Gradually the Sun passed by the Moon which could be seen blocking it in a direct line and resumed sending out its own rays. The people were struck with terror and propitiated the Deity with prayers, as was fitting at that time. I myself was then living in Byzantium pursuing my general education."

For translations of similar descriptions by chroniclers of eclipses occurring over Cairo (978), Cluny (1035), Baghdad (1061), England (1140), Germany (1147), China (1275), Avignon (1390), and Salamanca (1478), go to Medievalists. net

"Don't let the Sun catch you crying" – Gerry and the Pacemakers

Ancient engineering

DAVID HAMBLING says that despite the Internet memes the Great Pyramid's mysteries are fading

While discussing 50 years of FT (**FT438:14**), I mentioned that in 1973 the Great Pyramid was baffling and discussion of lost technology or alien intervention was rife, but since then the mystery has faded. Some readers disagreed, and the Internet is still awash with pyramid myths, so perhaps a deeper dive is needed.

The Great Pyramid or Pyramid of Khufu was one of the original Seven Wonders of the World. Built in the third millennium BC, it is still awesome even surrounded by the suburbs of modern Giza. It stands over 138 metres (453ft) or about 52 storeys on a massive base 220 metres (722ft) across, giving the impression of a man-made mountain. More than two million limestone blocks went into the construction, most weighing a couple of tons, but the biggest weighing more than 60 tons.

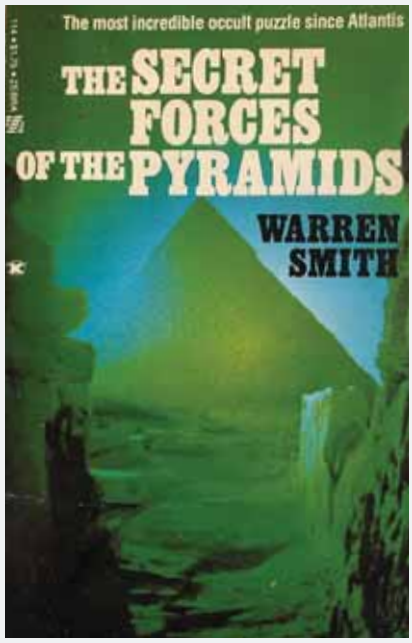
One of the many memes loose on the Internet claims it would be impossible to build the Great Pyramid today, because modern cranes do not have the capacity to move 60-ton blocks of stone. Needless to say, this is not true.

Every few years an engineering company calculates the effort needed to replicate the Great Pyramid. According to a 2012 estimate the job would require 2,000 workers and take five years at a cost of $5 billion. That is big, but not huge; the London-to-Birmingham leg of the HS2 rail project will cost over 10 times as much and take three times as long. And HS2 is unlikely to be revered as a wonder of the world in millennia to come.

FT correspondent Geoff Clifton concedes that while aliens may not have built the Great Pyramid "we still can't explain the incredible precision with which it was laid out and built… nobody can agree on the methods used" (**FT441:69**).

The precision is remarkable, but no more so than other structures of the time. Centuries of monumental tomb-building had taught the makers that they could fill a channel with water and use that as the level. The corners were made precise by bisecting the angle with a bevel, a simple tool still used by carpenters.

Archæologists now believe that the impressive precision of the north-south alignment was achieved using two specific stars, Mizar in Ursa Major and Kochab in Ursa Minor. When one stands above the other they gave true North at the time. Surveying was highly sophisticated even in ancient times; the Romans famously knew how to make perfectly straight roads between two cities far beyond line of sight. They did this by setting up a series of beacons along the way and aligning them using a simple but effective surveying tool called a groma. And while the incredible precision of pyramid construction is often mentioned, a closer examination shows sections where the gaps between the blocks have been filled in with sand or small stones. Overhead views in particular show up just how untidy some of the masonry is.



The HS2 rail project is unlikely to be revered as a wonder of the world in millennia to come

In terms of precision, the Great Pyramid is a comparatively simple structure next to the Parthenon. Built in Athens more than 2,500 years ago, the Parthenon seems to be composed of straight lines and right angles, but is actually a mass of clever optical illusions designed to give that impression. The makers compensated for known effects which make lintels appear to sag and columns to have a waist when they are straight. A series of tiny but significant 'corrections' make the Parthenon appear more perfect than a geometrically perfect design.

LEFT: The 1970s was a golden age for books about the pyramids and other 'ancient mysteries'.

Precision is secondary though. The Great Pyramid impresses due to its sheer size, though it is smaller than the Great Pyramid of Cholula in Mexico.

We know where the stones were quarried, and have a pretty good idea how they were transported. Current thinking says they were moved on sleds hauled by muscle power, possibly aided by cobbles or rollers or a layer of sand. Some archæologists believe movement was via a lost canal built for the task. Water may even have been used to raise the stones, the so-called water shaft theory, but the consensus is that they were brought up on a series of ramps, either external or internal, probably spiralling around the pyramid rather than straight. This effort was likely aided by levers which were well known by this time.

Ultimately the mystery boils down to number-crunching how many thousand workers were needed to shift the required number of stone blocks during the pyramid's 27-year construction. Writing in the 5th century BC, Herodotus claimed that 100,000 labourers were involved. Egyptologists now put the number at closer to 30,000.

Fifty years ago we knew nothing of the pyramid builders. Now archæologists have explored their living accommodation, bakeries, breweries and other facilities, including graveyards. Their remains showed typical signs of hard physical labour as well as broken bones which had been set. Other evidence, including graffiti, showed how the workers were divided into small groups who lived and worked together.

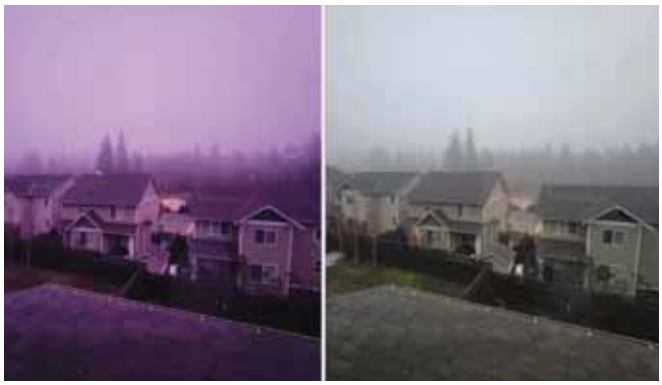
The more light is shed on the Great Pyramid's construction, the less magical it becomes. It was not built by priests wielding mystical antigravity rays, but by work gangs with names like 'The drunks of Menkaura,' sweating to haul blocks faster than their rivals with the motivation of an evening's beer ration. Workers received more than 10 pints a day each, though it was weak stuff by modern standards. Further discoveries may help support or undermine theories of the exact techniques involved. But the Great Pyramid is not a conjuring trick which loses interest when you know how it was done. It may not belong in the category of unexplained phenomena, but it is a remarkable feat of ancient engineering and a monument to the lasting power of collective effort.

WEATHER TURNS WEIRD

Frost quakes shakes Illinois, 'gorilla hail' falls in Kansas and a purple fog engulfs British Columbia

ICE QUAKES

In January, the area around Chicago experienced widespread frost quakes, something that occurs after sudden freezing of the ground. Known as cryoseism, the phenomenon produces small earthquake-like tremors and loud booming and popping sounds. "It sort of sounds like somebody is either snapping a very large branch off a tree or maybe popping very large bubble wrap. It's not quite gunfire, but it's sort of like that, and it can be that loud," said Illinois state climatologist Trent Ford. "The shaking is less common," he added. "Those can be like small earthquakes, not nearly to the extent of where pictures fall off the wall," but in the most extreme conditions frost quakes can damage roads and building foundations. The quakes need a precise set of conditions, usually occurring after a rainy period when there's little snow on the ground, as this creates an insulation layer that slows the freezing. "What we need is for the soil to be nearly saturated with water so that there's very little airspace to fill," Ford said. "And then you need a rapid freeze." Normally, soil can expand and contract as conditions change, but once it has been frozen like this it behaves as a solid so that when water in the soil freezes and expands, the soil reacts more like rock, fracturing and forming fissures. It is this process that makes the popping and booming sounds. Researchers have found that quakes are likely to occur when the temperature rapidly drops to more than minus 20°C (-4°F) at a rate of about one degree per hour. Andrew Leung, of the University of Toronto Scarborough, who researches cryoseism, says that "Since temperature typically drops at night, frost quakes are most frequently reported at night or overnight, sometimes being mistaken for a burglar breaking into the house." *editions.cnn.com, 19 Jan 2024.*



CALIN COHAN

ABOVE: Photos taken by Calin Cohan in West Kelowna, British Columbia, 10 minutes apart show the town turned pink before it reverted to its usual grey. **BELOW:** Hailstones the size of golfballs fell in Kansas and Missouri in early March.

JEREMY CRABTREE

GORILLA HAIL

Storms in Kansas and Missouri in early March caused chaos on the roads as parts of those states were pelted by what has been described as "gorilla hail". Four-inch (10cm) diameter hail stones fell in the town of Wabaunsee and three-inch (7.6cm) hail in Geary County near Junction City and Fort Riley, with local residents comparing the size of the stones to golf balls. apples, softballs and baseballs. Traffic on Interstate 70 was disrupted as the massive chunks of hail hammered into cars, denting bodywork and cracking windscreens. "When you get up to tennis ball, baseball-sized or, God forbid, softball-sized, that can do a tremendous amount of damage, and if you get hit in the head, that could be fatal," said Alex Sosnowski, a senior meteorologist at weather forecaster AccuWeather. The weather system responsible also came with a risk of tornadoes, so tornado warnings were given out around Topeka, while thunderstorm warnings were issued northeast of Kansas City in Missouri. These were mostly heeded and there were no reports of injuries. breakingnews.ie 14 Mar 2024. *BBC News, 30 Jan 2024.*

PURPLE HAZE

For 10 to 15 minutes at around 7.15 on 31 January, the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, Canada, was engulfed in a fog that varied in colour from purple to pink before reverting to the usual grey. In Kelowna, local resident Lise Guyot said "I thought, 'OK, what's going on out there?' It looked surreal." She described being immersed in the fog as "an entirely different experience." Sixty kilometres (37 miles) away, in Penticton, Dana Coates reported the fog as starting out as purple at around 7.15am. before changing to pink and later blue before becoming grey. Weather scientist Darius Mahdavi said pink fog is "an incredibly rare phenomenon" and is caused by the same effect that makes the sky change colour at sunrise and sunset. "When sunlight has to pass through more layers of atmosphere – or in this case, the suspended water droplets that make up the fog – some of the colours, especially the blues, get scattered out, leaving the reds and oranges and pinks to reach your eyes," he explained, "but the conditions have to be just right and are near impossible to predict, so it's really a matter of being in the right place at the right time." *cbc.ca, 31 Jan 2024.*

CONFUSING CLOUD

Radar has become an essential tool for tracking weather systems as they change and develop, but on 20 January, the National Weather Service (NWS) radar at Fort Worth, Texas, showed a thinly shaped blob of what appeared to be storm cloud passing over Dallas-Fort Worth; however, outside, the sky was clear, and the weather was dry with no sign of any clouds. Having explored various meteorological explanations and discounted them, the NWS said, "Our best guess is chaff." This is a substance used by the military to confuse enemy radar systems and is made up of aluminium-coated glass fibres less than a centimetre (0.4in) long. "The military will sometimes run exercises where they release chaff and it's completely harmless," explained the NWS. "But it definitely shows up on radar as it is quite reflective." The military, however, did not report any local exercises involving chaff, and the NWS claim met with some public scepticism, with social media posters saying, "Yeah, no. That's a ton of chaff. The entire metroplex would be covered in it. So if you find it post it," and "If weather radar is picking this up, how irresponsible of the military to dump that over two major airports and clutter up their radar scopes with a cloud of primary targets?"

Chaff is known to cause considerable confusion, though, and not just to the enemy. Last summer Utah scientists issued a warning that a large swarm of grasshoppers was heading toward the northwest of the state, believing they had detected them on radar, but later realised that this was, in fact, chaff from a military exercise and withdrew their warning. *chron.com, 28 Jan 2024.*

Spirits of Sutton Hoo

ALAN MURDIE explores the Suffolk Spiritualists' finest hour and the trial of Helen Duncan

SPK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Sutton Hoo, Suffolk: People spoke of "shadowy figures around the mounds after dusk and a vision of a man on a white horse".

In March 2011 on the day of my birthday I decided to take a long-overdue trip to Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, a place made famous by the discovery of a Dark Ages ship burial in 1939. Looking back on my visit – of which I was reminded by announcements in March 2024 from the TV and online show *Time Team* of plans for more excavations at the site – it is with a sense of mild reproach I indict myself for not ever visiting sooner.

The fact I hadn't – despite then being a Suffolk resident with long-standing interests in archæology and ghosts – was partly down to prejudices absorbed in my formative years. Some were imbibed by reading a book – *Discovering Regional Archaeology Eastern England* (1973) by James Dyer – where the author declared, "In spite of the celebrity of this site, it is probably one of the most disappointing in our area" in terms of what was left to see many years after the original dig.

> "Sometimes one gets the feeling that it was a bit loopy to consult a medium, but I don't think that's the case at all"

The outline in the sandy soil of a rowing boat some 90ft (27m) feet in length and 14ft (4m) wide was long reburied and the treasures and regalia of an East Anglian king were deposited at the British Museum. I also felt the attention lavished on Sutton Hoo eclipsed the much older and (to me) much more interesting and immense prehistory of East Anglia, a far longer period than the Anglo-Saxon era that lasted a few hundred years.

Finally, while being keen on ghosts from a young age, in my early days I was only vaguely intrigued by the Spiritualist claims surrounding the Sutton Hoo excavations being generally rather doubtful about subjective visions experienced by mediums (I have revised my opinion since).

But on arriving, I was swiftly reminded one should not accept all one reads, being immediately driven to alter my ideas concerning the visual impression that Sutton Hoo makes. It was obvious Dyer had fixed his narrow gaze only upon the mounds and missed entirely the impact conveyed in perceiving the wider landscape by approaching it from the river Deben. The land rises up in a promontory or escarpment of 100ft (30m), striking by Suffolk standards and especially within this otherwise low-lying area, 10 miles (16km) from the sea. Furthermore, from 1998 the National Trust worked hard at enhancing its monumental

character, adding an exhibition and doing, in my view, an altogether good job with not a great deal. By then I was also rather impressed that the Trust openly acknowledged the stories of psychic visions being behind the 1939 discoveries.

Popular accounts aver how the then widowed landowner Mrs Edith Pretty (1883-1942) was sympathetic to Spiritualism. She was encouraged to launch excavation work by dreams or visions, experienced by either herself or a friend, of ghostly warriors hovering on her land. Inspired by these psychic impressions, she reached out to Ipswich Museum, which recommended she commissioned self-taught archæologist Basil Brown (1888-1977) of Rickinghall to start excavations, assisted by two of her gardeners.

According to Professor Martin Carver of the Department of Archæology at the University of York, in his book *The Sutton Hoo Story* (2017), some of Edith Pretty's visitors spoke of "shadowy figures around the mounds after dusk and a vision of a man on a white horse". The stories are somewhat garbled; conceivably, there could have been a combination of several different experiences or communications. The Spiritualist angle was virtually omitted from the 2021 film *The Dig* (reviewed **FT403:62**), save for one oblique reference to Basil Brown possibly undergoing a near-death experience when a tunnel collapses in on him.

However, it is agreed Brown began digging in 1938 with interesting though not spectacular results, yielding only fragments of artefacts and, more promisingly, ship rivets of Anglo-Saxon origin. Then, in May 1939, digging began into the largest mound where the royal ship burial came to light in July 1939. Charles Phillips (1905-1985), a Cambridge don, then took command of excavations, notified the British Museum and the Ministry of Works, and called in two professionally trained archæologists, Stuart and Margaret Piggott.

Phillips, in his posthumous autobiography *My Life in Archaeology* (1987), tells of Mrs Pretty regularly consulting with a medium every Thursday in London. Reflecting upon this, Professor Carver was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* (4 Feb 2021): "Sometimes one gets the feeling that it was a bit loopy to consult a medium, but I don't think that's the case at all. She was pretty rational; she was clearly intelligent and interested. And at that time [mediums were] quite popular in many ways."

It was indeed so. Over 20 years earlier, Frederick Bligh Bond (1868-1945) used automatic writing to guide what became controversial excavations at Glastonbury Abbey (see **FT143:40-44, 249:50-54, 363:50-51**). The mid-1920s and early 1930s were also a peak time for scientific mediumistic research, with some fascinating results obtained.

Mrs Pretty initially insisted the tomb was of a queen until the "starkly masculine character" of the discoveries and intricately bejewelled weapons indicated it was the grave or cenotaph of a powerful war leader, probably King Raedwald of East Anglia (died c. AD 624). After these finds were declared not to be treasure trove, they became the property of Mrs Pretty. According to Phillips, her medium came up to Suffolk, visited the site and asked him what was to be done with them.

Phillips told him the treasures should be given to the nation, which Mrs Pretty duly did, perhaps encouraged by further Spiritualist communications received at Woodbridge Spiritualist Church by a local man, Alfred Scarfe, through another medium named Florence Thompson.

What is less well-known is that this may not have been the first attempt at contacting the spirit world in relation to Sutton Hoo.

Phillips mentions that the royal barrow showed signs of prior excavation by a robber in the 16th century, who sank a shallow pit into the top of the mound, but missed the treasure. Within an incompletely filled hole were traces of a fire, beef bones and the handle from a Bellarmine jug, potentially evidence of a magical ceremony. Bellarmine jugs and bottles were issued as mocking caricatures of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), a leading figure in the Catholic counter-reformation in Europe, but came to be used as charms in popular magic because of his reputation as an exorcist. It points to the possibility of a spirit-raising ritual conducted at the mound for locating treasure. Specimens of Bellarmines were used in anti-witchcraft binding ceremonies with examples being found concealed in the walls of ancient East Anglian houses (see **FT359:32-37**).

Phillips even airs a suggestion about the identity of this tomb raider – fingering none other than Dr John Dee (1527-1608; see **FT248:76, 290:74, 338:12, 372:42**) of Mortlake, the famous Elizabethan spy, magician and necromancer, whom it "was believed had a licence to open barrows in the neighbourhood".

Such proceedings were tainted

TOP: Dr John Dee, possibly a Sutton Hoo tomb raider. **ABOVE**: Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) and Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes) as seen in the 2012 film *The Dig* based on the Sutton Hoo excavations.

with illegality, Henry VIII making it a capital offence under his Witchcraft Act from 1 May 1542 for any person who used witchcraft or might "use, devise, practise or exercise any… invocations or conjurations of spirits, witchcrafts, enchantments or sorceries to the intent to get or find money or treasure". Dee may have possessed such a warrant exempting him, and might also have availed himself of a technicality following an amendment in the law, if the spirits he endeavoured to consult were principally good ones (and he said nothing about using them to look for treasure). This was because 20 years after Henry VIII's Act, in 1563, the Parliament of Elizabeth I passed "an act against conjuracions, inchantments and witchecraftes", which subtly refined the law, specifically prohibiting the invoking or conjuring of "evill and wicked Spirities" for any purpose. Repeat offenders could be sentenced to hang, but the Act downgraded the penalty for using "Witchecraft Enchantement Charme or Sorcerie" for finding lost goods, stolen things or treasure to an offence punishable by imprisonment for one year for a first offence, a considerable difference.

The law left open the possibility that calling up good, neutral or indifferent spirits might not be technically prohibited according to the letter of the law, though knowing something of the inconsistency of modern magistrates, I would not presume such fine distinctions would have been comprehended by all their Elizabethan predecessors. The haphazard application of the law was demonstrated when Robert Browning of Sussex was convicted in 1598 of defrauding the Queen's subjects by "persuading them that by conjuration and invocation of evil spirits they might discover hidden hoards of gold and silver, and regain lost goods". He risked the gallows, but was sentenced to the pillory instead (actually no light punishment) probably owing to him fraudulently claiming to invoke spirits rather than actually doing so.

In turn, the Act was replaced by sterner legislation under James I, but it maintained the distinction against "conjuration, Witchcrafte and dealing with evill and wicked spirits". And this technicality – if we take a diversion – became an issue over two centuries later arising from the trial and conviction at the Old Bailey in 1944 of the controversial Scottish medium Helen Duncan (1897-1956; see **FT116:40-43, 372:38, 45**).

In 1735 Parliament had passed a further Witchcraft Act abolishing most of the offences. The 1735 Act was "for the more effectual preventing and punishing

ABOVE: The medium Helen Duncan in 1931.

any pretences to such arts or powers… whereby ignorant persons are frequently deluded and defrauded". It presumed witchcraft to be a fraud or delusion from start to finish, the only criminal aspect remaining being cases where "… any person shall… pretend to exercise or use any kind of witchcraft, sorcery, inchantment, or conjuration".

Despite this statutory presumption against sorcery, not everyone stopped believing in witchcraft. In rural districts people continued ascribing poltergeist disturbances to malevolent magic into the 20th century (an idea given sympathetic treatment in Charles Fort's *Wild Talents*, 1932) with this idea still remaining current in parts of the world today. However, the general change in outlook meant by the 20th century when Edith Pretty consulted spirits or took ghostly visions as a sign encouraging archæological digging on her own land, realistically she risked no penalty in law. But the transformation of the law or wider attitudes was not yet complete regarding summoning spirits, as the indictment of Helen Duncan five years after the Sutton Hoo excavation demonstrated.

Evidence had long stacked up against Duncan, with samples of the ectoplasm she appeared to generate being found to be paper, cloth and egg white. She was suspected of swallowing and regurgitating cheesecloth, displayed violent hysterical reactions if she thought she was to be X-rayed in tests by psychical researchers, and was convicted of fraud and fined £10 in a court in Edinburgh in 1930. Her personal maid, Mary McGinlay, made a statutory declaration recalling purchasing lengths of cheesecloth for her before séances, and washing them out again afterwards.

Undeterred, she continued her career during World War II, leading her to perform at a Spiritualist circle in Portsmouth convened above a chemist's shop. Allegations of fraud led to a police raid on one of her séances on 19 January 1944, aided by a naval officer posing as an ordinary sitter. She was arrested and prosecuted along with four accomplices, all charged with falsely pretending to conjure spirits, contrary to the Witchcraft Act 1735.

Her defence barrister Charles Loseby, a Spiritualist himself, attempted gallantly but vainly to prove her powers real. He called a parade of witnesses to testify as to her genuineness, but appeared to only bore and alienate the jury, according to observers. Duncan was found guilty and sentenced to nine months in prison, a disputed verdict still condemned as a miscarriage of justice by some believers today.

Loseby then commenced an appeal, heard over 8-10 June 1944, in the Court of Appeal, attempting to argue Duncan

was not technically guilty under the 1735 Act. His last grains of hope for her acquittal were derived from citing a lengthy list of archaic statutes and definitions from legal dictionaries up to 1923. By these, Loseby endeavoured to show the law originally applied to summoning *evil* spirits, as in Tudor and Stuart times, whereas Mrs Duncan's spirits – those of deceased friends and family members of the audience – were not evil and, moreover, what she did could not qualify as "conjuration".

I actually think Loseby had a point here, at least as regards statutory interpretation. Allegedly, what Duncan did was fall into a trance and exude ectoplasm, a state that technically or clinically might fall outside the scope of a 'conjuration' as understood in 1735.

Against this the Crown argued the Act prohibited "any kind of conjuration", pressing an *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "conjuration" as the "invoking of spirits. Effecting of something supernatural... by the use of some spell: *orig*. the compelling of spirits or demons... to appear." Furthermore, the omission of the word 'evil' in 1735 supported a broader reading of the statute. Unfortunately, as the law stood at the time, the Court of Appeal had little interest in the mental state of the accused or in any alleged states of automatism, save in cases of insanity.

So the Duncan conviction stood, leaving many other Spiritualists aghast at such a sweeping definition potentially criminalising much of what they might do, treasure-seeking included. Edith Pretty had herself already died, but serious and influential Spiritualists such as Air Marshal Lord Dowding, architect of the Battle of Britain, were already lobbying the Government to change the law. Eventually this followed with the Fraudulent Medium Act 1951, after which Spiritualists and witches of all varieties were free to conjure up whatever they wanted, provided they were not engaged in fraudulently extorting money. The legality of looking for hidden money or treasure by using spirits was put beyond all doubt and even still gets reported into the 21st century. In an interview with the *Birmingham Mail* in 2009, a Mr Terry Herbert, who unearthed a 1,500-piece Anglo Saxon treasure hoard in Staffordshire, revealed he invoked spiritual help: "I have this phrase that I say sometimes, 'Spirits of yesteryear, take me where the coins appear', but on that day I changed 'coins' to 'gold'. I don't know why I said it that day, but I think somebody was listening and directed me to it." (See **FT257:18**, Jan 2010) Thus, it could be said

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Today we are all at liberty to use psychic means in the cause of archæology or treasure-hunting

ABOVE: The Master's Temple Church of Spiritual Healing, Copnor Road, Portsmouth, where Helen Duncan was arrested in January 1941; she and three associates were charged under the Witchcraft Act of 1735. **BELOW LEFT**: Helen Duncan producing ectoplasm.

the mind-set of spirit-raising Tudor treasure seekers continues.

A petition to pardon Helen Duncan floundered in the Scottish Parliament in 2008 and a campaign to quash her conviction in England in 2012 has not yet succeeded, but today we are all at liberty to use psychic means in the cause of archæology or treasure-hunting. As for Spiritualists in Suffolk, the Sutton Hoo finds of 1939 surely must rate as their finest hour.

Sources: 'Sutton Hoo to have a fresh dig exploring mysterious features', *BBC News*, 8 Mar 2024; 'My Buried History' by John Preston, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 2007; 'Sutton Hoo – Finding the Hoard' by Rodney Castledean in *The Unknown* (Dec 1986); BBC News, 5 Mar 2008, and Britain's 'last witch': Campaign to pardon Helen Duncan', 15 June 2012; R v Duncan [1944] KB 713; 'Materialisation: Fact or Fiction?' SPR study day 2, April 1997; *Medium on Trial: The Story of Helen Duncan and the Witchcraft Act* by M Cassirer (1997); *Hellish Nell: The Last of Britain's Witches* (2010) by Malcolm Gaskill; *Psychic News*, 5 May 1939 and 28 Feb 1976.

For another account of the history of the Sutton Hoo discoveries, see 'Fortean Traveller: Sutton Hoo', Matt Salusbury, **FT390:72-75**.

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS | Most of a missing gorilla turns up, cat shaving spreads to Berkshire and Ron's Place is listed

BEAR SCOTLAND

GARY THE GORILLA [FT439:10]

A year after an 8ft (2.4m) fiberglass gorilla was stolen from Reynard Nursery in Carluke, Scotland, in the middle of the night, he has been found; or at least, half of him has. Andy Moir, a superintendent from road maintenance contractor BEAR Scotland, explained how his team made the discovery on the A92 between Dundee and Arbroath: "We were out on our usual morning route inspection when we spotted something lurking in the bushes at the back of a layby. When we pulled in to check it out, we were pretty shocked to see a gorilla's bum staring us in the face." After some research they realised they had found Gary, but only his back half. He had been sawn in half and the rear portion had been dumped in the layby. BEAR returned this to the nursery, whose owner Andrew Scott said he was "happy in one way" to have Gary back, but disappointed that it was only half of him, although he remains hopeful that the other half will be returned one day. "I'm at Tesco just now buying Gorilla glue in case the other half happens to appear," he said. "But for now, we're planning to fix him to the wall in the garden centre and put a sign up above him saying 'Gary's back'." *BBC News, 26 Mar 2024.*

CAT SHAVER MYSTERY [FT414:4, 430:24, 437:25]

After a renewed outbreak of cat shaving in Coventry and the Medway towns in early 2023, followed by incidents near Aberdeen and in Rugeley, Littlehampton, and Southampton, the Berkshire towns of Lambourn and Hungerford are the latest to be targeted by a cat shaver. Since the summer of 2023 cats in both towns have been returning home with conspicuously shaved patches on their bodies, with incidents continuing into 2024. One Lambourn resident, posting on social media, said, "My cat has been shaved constantly for months now... it's weird." Norwich residents have also reported incidents of cat shaving, with Sophie-Louise Parks, from Bowthorpe, finding a shaved patch of fur on her cat Gizmo, and Tammy Cullum's cat Flo being shaved after going outside in nearby New Costessey. "You can tell it's not from being scratched or bitten and you can clearly see the square shape where the clippers have clipped her fur," said Cullum. Natasha McPhee, 39, who runs the charity Animals Lost and Found in Gillingham, Kent, and monitors the cat shaving situation nationally, said, "A while ago there was an incident when an elderly lady was shaving cats going into her garden to punish them. She was spoken to by the police, and she stopped. So I'm not sure if something like that is happening. But this is happening in such a widespread area that I don't think it's an old lady in every single town doing it." *dailymail.co.uk, 19 Mar 2024.*

SYRIAN BLAST DEMONS [440:23]

The kind of brain damage seen in artillery veterans from Syria who found themselves haunted by persistent and grotesque hallucinations on return from the battlefield has also been found in the brain of Robert Card, Maine's deadliest mass shooter. Last October, following months of increasingly erratic and violent behaviour, Card went on an armed rampage in Lewiston, Maine, and killed 18 people, mostly in Schemengees Bar & Grille. Prior to his attack, he had reported continually hearing voices and suffered paranoid delusions, becoming increasingly convinced that everyone was talking behind his back, calling him a pædophile, and had spent some time in a psychiatric hospital after making threats against fellow soldiers. While Card had never been deployed in a war zone, he had spent eight years as a grenade instructor in the Army Reserve. During this time, it is estimated that he was exposed to at least 10,000 grenade blasts. In the artillerymen, blast exposure was shown to produce catastrophic brain damage, causing them to be haunted by visions of the dead and shadowy monsters; when Card's brain was examined by Boston University's CTE Center, which specialises in these kinds of injury, it was found to have the same characteristic pattern of damage. "The damage was just tremendous," said Dr Lee Goldstein. Currently the US military does not class exposure to grenade blasts as harmful, as it does with artillery detonations, although previous studies of grenade instructors had revealed worrying signs of damage. *nytimes.com, 8 Mar 2024.*

RON'S PLACE [426:21]

Long regarded as an entertaining local eccentric in his hometown of Birkenhead, Ron Gittins gave little hint as to what lay within the rented flat on Silverdale Road where he lived, particularly as he would not allow anyone else inside. This included those necessary to maintain it, so that he lived for much of the time without basic amenities. When he died in 2019, aged 79, though,

PHOTOS: RON'S PLACE

ABOVE: The Minotaur Room and the 'Roman Altar' in the kitchen of Ron's Place.

it was discovered that, while the place was piled high with bags, boxes, magazines, videos, and handwritten notes, some in code, it was also a self-created outsider art wonderland.

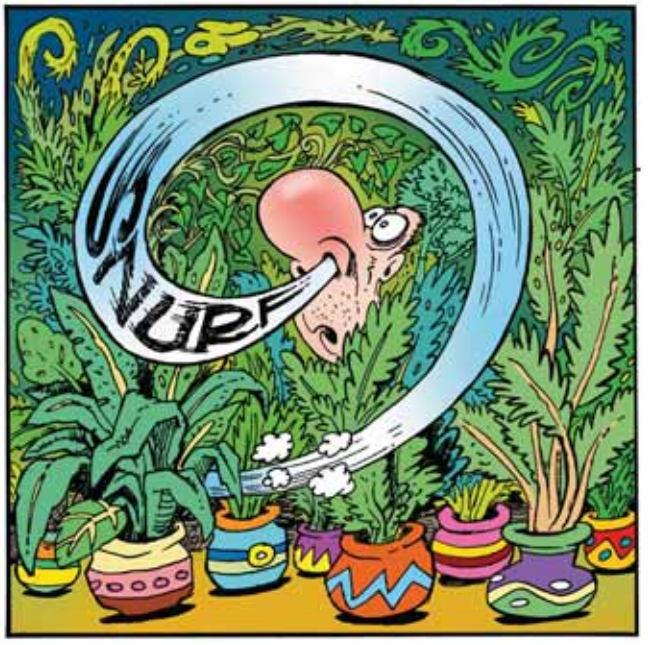
The flat was full of papier-mâché figures and costumes Ron had made by hand and each room had been painstakingly crafted into a unique fantasy realm inspired by ancient Greece and Egypt. This included fireplaces in the shape of a lion and a minotaur, Egyptian and Greek murals painted floor to ceiling, and a Roman altar in the kitchen. As it was a rented flat, it did not pass to Ron's family on his death and the owners put it up for sale, leaving his unique creation at risk of destruction. This resulted in a campaign led by the Saving Ron's Place group, which included former Pulp singer Jarvis Cocker. They first managed to raise £335,000 to buy the building, then, in early April, persuaded Historic England to grant the flat Grade II listed status, the first piece of outsider art (art created by artists with no formal training) to be nationally listed. The listing said that this was in recognition of Gittens's "unique artistic achievements and vision".

Historic England spokesperson Sarah Charlesworth said, "Ron's Place is testament to the unique artistic achievements and vision of Ron Gittins over four decades." Gittins's niece Jan Williams said, "I believe Ron would be made up and very proud at all the attention he's receiving, and thrilled his work is being recognised and appreciated." Ron's Place will now be used for creative arts programmes to promote art and mental health awareness in Wirral. *BBC News, 5 Apr 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

280: HEALTHY HOUSEPLANTS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Living plants in your rooms cleanse the indoor air of pollutants.

The "truth"

Well, yes, they do remove some pollutants from the air – but for that to happen at a level which would make any difference to humans you are going to need, according to the latest research, about 10 plants per square foot. (And presumably that means mature plants, not seedlings). There isn't going to be room left for a telly or a bed, let alone the kids. Ordinary "air exchange mechanisms" – for instance, opening a window – are vastly more effective. The reason so many websites (and, indeed, houseplant merchants) insist otherwise seems to be an experiment carried out in 1989 by NASA, in which plants in small, sealed chambers had gases blown over them. It found an improvement in levels of oxygen vs carbon dioxide, and a potential for improving air purity. There was no suggestion that this effect could be reproduced in a non-airtight, room-sized space. Three decades of wildly optimistic extrapolation from those very limited (and indeed subsequently unreplicated) findings has resulted in many people believing that putting a potted plant next to their bed will keep their lungs clean. The better news is that there's considerable evidence to suggest that tending to houseplants can have a beneficial effect on psychological stress levels.

Sources

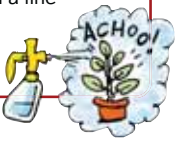
www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/03/indoor-plants-clean-air-best-none-them/584509/; *Financial Times*, 16 Mar 2024; www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/houseplants-dont-purify-indoor-air

Disclaimer

We've read enough conspiracy thrillers to know what happens to people who tangle with NASA, so just to be clear: this isn't us saying this, it's a load of Profs, and we'd be happy to hear from anyone who can contradict it.

Mythchaser

While we're exploring the indoor jungle, can we get a ruling on misting? Many owners treat their houseplants to a daily spray from a fine nozzle. But can this really change the humidity around a plant significantly, or is it just spritzing in the wind?



THE CONSPIRASPHERE

OJ Simpson has been back in the news, along with Planet Nibiru, the Covid vaccines and the Deagel report. **NOEL ROONEY** watches as the conspirasphere cycles through some old favourites

RE-EMERGENCES

Every so often, a news item turns up that casts the Conspirasphere as a cyclical phenomenon. Stories and events that were pivotal, or more often apocalyptic, disappear, only to resurface after a few years. In recent weeks, several such stories have emerged, as if the C-sphere is haunted with echoes (Why not? Much of popular culture is precisely so haunted).

Planet Nibiru made a comeback – and with it the massed ranks of the Annunaki – when a team of scientists published a report suggesting that gravitational anomalies in the region of space beyond Pluto were indicative of a large planetary body. Nibiru, so the story goes, visits the inner Solar System every 36,000 years. If Zechariah Sitchin is to be believed (and I see no particular reason why he should be) then the last visit was relatively recent, perhaps 10,000 years ago. So these new intimations of Planet 9, as curmudgeonly astronomers like to call it, are a little out of sequence.

They do, though, for some observers, prove a point; that what conspiracy theorists say, and get ridiculed for, is often pretty close to the things that scientists say, and get funded for. It's arguable whether the Sitchin acolytes or the astronomers got the scoop on the extra planet, but it's certainly curious to see their paths converge, however coincidental we like to think that is. And I don't know many conspiracists who believe in coincidence.

The death of OJ Simpson brought a lot of curious creatures out from under the rug. Some of them claimed to know things that the jury in his famous trial for murder were not allowed to see. Some simply relied on Simpson's

LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT

Innuendoes have morphed into scriptural truth in some quarters

subsequent behaviour (including a book titled, bizarrely, *If I Did It*) and at least two alleged confessions, which have resurfaced, as has a screed of online literature comparing Simpson to George Floyd (a comparison that puzzles me greatly). All in all, it seems that OJ's legacy is tainted.

Tainted one way and another: one of his legal team at the trial was a lawyer named Robert Kardashian. He and Simpson were great buddies as well as colleagues, by all accounts. If the lawyer's name rings a bell with you, hold the thought; we are getting there. Rumours circulated for years that OJ was in fact the father of Chloe Kardashian (that's probably Khloe Kardashian in pop speak); then they went away, only to be resurrected when Simpson went in the opposite direction.

The peculiar thing is that one can, without too much effort or imagination, find plenty of statements by both alleged father and daughter that could be construed as tongue-in-cheek acknowledgements of paternity. Naturally enough, these innuendoes from the protagonists have morphed into scriptural truth in some quarters. More to the point, it seems that all stories about Simpson have been idling in the slow lane (rather like a famous 1994 car chase) waiting for him to pass so they can emerge in new garb. I'd get excited about this if it didn't mean getting excited about the Kardashians.

The most sinister re-emergence of recent weeks, however, concerns the Deagel report. Deagel, an intelligence analysis outfit thought by many to be a front for the CIA, became more famous than they might have liked in 2020 when they published a report suggesting that the world's population would fall drastically by 2025. The UK would lose 77 per cent of its people and other countries would suffer a similarly drastic reduction. For a couple of years, the Deagel report was tacked on to any conspiracy that addressed the subject of depopulation (and thanks to Bill Gates, George Soros and – probably – God, there were lots of them).

So here we are in 2024, the world apparently just as overcrowded as ever; no cause for concern, surely? Well, yes, except you may have noticed a few media news items in recent weeks talking about a fall in world population. Interestingly, given how upset the great and good have been about overpopulation for a very long time, the news was cast as an impending disaster. And Deagel is definitely on the side of the doom-mongers.

The reasons they gave for this precipitous drop in population (mainly in Europe and the US, curiously) were a little vague but generally hinged on a future pandemic, or biological warfare; which brings us, by a process of inexorable, if oblique, logic, to Covid, or more precisely, the Covid vaccines. When the corporations that produced the vaccines did their animal and clinical trials, they were somewhat coy about the results; in fact, it took a series of court orders before they released the trial data, and some of it makes uncomfortable reading.

In particular, there appear to have been real concerns over the effect of the vaccine on fertility. The data suggest that the vaccine had a negative effect on fertility in both animals and human subjects. Perhaps that's why some companies were reluctant to furnish the information. Or perhaps they were simply toeing a eugenicist line, one promulgated by – of course – Bill Gates et al. The bio-weapon wasn't the bug, despite the suspicions around the Wuhan Institute; it was the vaccine, and it was planned, and it was known to Deagel in 2020.

And if Deagel were hedging their bets we might add in the current fear of imminent nuclear annihilation generated by the war in Gaza, and the potential for a wider Middle East conflict. So many ways to kill people are available that we (or rather They) are spoilt for choice; yet I find myself yearning for more.

https://famous-trials.com/simpson/1857-evidence

https://expose-news.com/2024/04/28/division-distraction-problem-reaction-solution-2/

https://www.thevoid.uk/void-post/deagel-2025-population-and-output-forecast-revisited-essential-guide/

FRAUDULENT FUNERAL

The mystery of a dead Latvian student, a £10,000 funeral with an empty coffin and a bizarre conman

DAVID CASTOR / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: The London Oratory in South Kensington where the fake funeral was held. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Jacky Jhaj, the man behind the bizarre funeral, seen at another fake event in London's Leicester Square in 2023. **BELOW LEFT:** Lauric Zaube, whose body was found in April. **BELOW RIGHT:** Father Rupert McHardy was left "quite shaken".

The body of Lauris Zaube, 23, a student in Latvia who went missing during a New Year's Eve party, was finally recovered from the River Lielupe in early April after extensive searches of the area. However, a funeral had already been held for him in London on 4 March. Father Rupert McHardy, 49, arrived at the London Oratory Roman Catholic church in South Kensington to conduct what he believed was Zaube's funeral, apparently organised by Clyde Zaube, Lauris's brother. Pictures of Lauris had been placed around the church, a choir had been booked and a film director was in place to record the ceremony for family in Latvia. Outside there was a horse-drawn hearse, two vintage cars and undertakers in top hats. As he prepared to start the ceremony, the concerned choir master pulled Hardy to one side and told him he believed something was amiss. Investigating, the priest found there was no body in the coffin and cancelled the whole thing.

The funeral directors, T Cribb and Sons, had been provided with a death certificate – albeit one originating in Russia – but the mourners turned out to be actors. Father McHardy said: "I was quite shaken afterwards. I felt very disturbed by it." Suspicions arose on the day when the funeral directors went to collect the body and were told: "There is no body, we have ashes". The strange behaviour

of the "mourners" was also noted by McHardy, who felt they would have been far more upset than they appeared to be if they were the family and friends of someone who had died. Indeed, there were two groups of alleged mourners present; the ones who turned out to be actors, whom McHardy described as "respectful and polite", and a second group, including "Clyde Zaube", who wore puffer jackets, balaclavas, hoods and dark glasses and were "sinister looking".

Even though the funeral was cancelled, the funeral directors and the church were paid in full, over £10,000; but while no one was out of pocket, everyone was baffled by the event. Further investigation revealed that the Zaube family had no knowledge of the funeral, and that Lauris did not have a brother named "Clyde", who was actually a 38-year-old man named Jacky Jhaj who had once appeared in a music video with Lauris Zaube. Lauris's actual brothers are named Aris and Maris.

In a somewhat sinister turn, following the fake funeral, *MailOnline* revealed that shortly after Zaube's disappearance, on 5 January, they had received a peculiar anonymous email from someone claiming to have inside knowledge of the case. It alleged that Zaube had been abducted by criminals who were holding him for ransom. It said that he had been lured from a party on the pretext of secretly meeting Jhaj, whom he would then take back inside as a "surprise" for the friends he'd met while making the music video. It went on to say that Zaube had then been snatched by the gang and the real Jhaj in London had received a demand for a ransom payment in cryptocurrency from the kidnappers. *MailOnline* believed the email "had all the hallmarks of having been written by Jhaj", although his reasons for making the allegations are unclear.

It seems Jhaj has a record of pulling bizarre stunts like this – in November 2023 he staged a fake red-carpet event in London's West End where he paraded up and down in a red tuxedo while a crowd of hired extras cheered, with the whole event being filmed. It emerged at the time that he was a convicted sex offender who had been jailed in 2016 on four counts of sexual activity with two 15-year-olds after posing as a film producer. Shown Jhaj's picture from that event, Father McHardy recognised him at once as Clyde, saying, "I saw him in the church, and he was wearing dark glasses and whenever I looked at him, he turned away. I have no idea who he is and why he would do such a thing." Indeed, it remains unclear why Jhaj staged either event. A film industry source who knows Jhaj said, "He's a self-aggrandising fantasist and conman. The motivation last time… seems to have been to boost the profile of his alter ego on social media. I have no idea what he was trying to do here, but it's certainly the same kind of fake enterprise." *mailonline.co.uk, 8+16 Mar 2024.*

Magical history tour

NIGEL WATSON reads the latest AARO report so you don't have to and investigates a roundabout

STRAIGHT AS AN AARO?

When Sean Kirkpatrick resigned from his role as director of the All Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) he pulled no punches. Writing in an op-ed for the *Scientific American* he states that there is no evidence for stories about Government cover-ups, reverse-engineering or ET craft; instead, he found these rumours have been repeated, and in the process have become 'facts', "by a small group of interconnected believers and others with possibly less than honest intentions – none of whom have first-hand accounts of any of this." There was certainly no evidence given to AARO by the so-called whistleblowers to substantiate their wild claims of non-terrestrial craft or ET crashes.

His last act was to prepare AARO's *Historical Record Report Volume 1*, dated February 2024, that asserts: "AARO determined, based on all information provided to date, that claims involving specific people, known locations, technological tests, and documents allegedly involved in or related to the reverse-engineering of extraterrestrial technology, are inaccurate." The report provides a comprehensive list of these allegations and: "AARO assesses that some portion of sightings since the 1940s have represented misidentification of never-before-seen experimental and operational space, rocket, and air systems, including stealth technologies and the proliferation of drone platforms."

The report details the main findings of official US UFO investigations from Project Saucer/Sign through Project Blue Book to the Advanced Aerospace Weapons System Application Program (AAWSAP) that operated from 2009 to 2012, and up to the establishment of AARO in 2022. It makes clear that the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP), often claimed to be part of AAWSAP, was never an official Department of Defense project and the "DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] did not seek, nor specifically authorise, this work through a DIA employee [who] set up and managed the contract with the private sector organisation."

Another section of the report considers the claims of interviewees that the US Government has concealed evidence of UFO crashes since 1947 along with the testing of off-world technology. This is followed by a section concerning interviews with USAF personnel regarding UAP sightings near nuclear facilities that caused nuclear missiles to malfunction. Volume 2 of AARO's report will consider the latter allegations and track down companies and individuals mentioned by interviewees.

A comprehensive list of unclassified and declassified authentic national security programmes, which AARO assesses were possibly associated with erroneous UAP reports, is provided and goes from the secrecy of the Manhattan atomic bomb project in 1942, through experiments with the Flying Pancake saucer-shaped aircraft up to the stealth and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) projects of today.

Its findings will be disappointing to ET supporters, but even they will appreciate that this is a handy guide to the various allegations, projects and programmes that have been run in the USA. But hang on! Former DIA man and disclosure advocate Christopher Mellon takes exception to this report, saying "…this is the most error-ridden and unsatisfactory Government report I can recall reading during or after decades of Government service." Besides various niggles, he points out that there is no mention of Foo Fighter and Ghost Rocket research, and the report does not refer to UAP investigations by such agencies as NORAD, NSA, DIA (prior to 2009) and CBP. Furthermore, the report claims that secret new technologies are responsible for many sightings and that instrumental tracking of UAPs is down to sensor artefacts or aberrations. Mellon is frustrated that it fails to cite one example of misidentified aircraft or drones, and asks what are these new technologies? (David Hambling does note some possibilities in **FT444:14**)

Mellon answers his own question when he notes Government UAP information is regulated by what he calls "excessive secrecy", leading him to ask: "How can the US Government be transparent about UAP sighting incidents if nothing will be released?" It is Mellon's view that AARO is following the Project Blue Book technique of labelling sightings they could not explain as being due to insufficient information – whereas it really means due to insufficient investigation.

As a last point, he wonders what AARO would accept as evidence to support the idea that extraterrestrial intelligence is visiting our planet? He is not impressed by their use of scientific methodology as it only looks at UAP data that does not exceed our present-day scientific understanding.

"Observations from a Government UFO Hunter," Sean Kirkpatrick, Scientific American Magazine, Vol. 330, No. 4, April 2024, p. 67; AARO Historical Record pdf at: media.defense.gov/2024/Mar/08/2003409233/-1/-1/0/DOPSR-CLEARED-508-COMPLIANT-HRRV1-08-MAR-2024-FINAL.PDF; "The Pentagon's New UAP Report Is Seriously Flawed," Christopher Mellon, The Debrief, 12 April 2024, at: https://thedebrief.org/the-pentagons-new-uap-report-is-seriously-flawed/

BACK TO BLACK

In my last column I mistakenly referred to figures and lights seen dancing at 'Blackstone Circle'. That should be 'Backstone Circle'. This led me to wonder if there *is* a Blackstone Circle; and through the magic of Google I found one at Weirs Beach, Lake Winnipesaukee, New Hampshire, USA (pictured above). Rather than being a prehistoric site shrouded in mystery it is a more prosaic three-way traffic intersection. Nonetheless, we should not be snooty, as it does have its own web page. This tells us it replaced Blackstone Square, which was such a traffic hazard that it was nicknamed "Dysfunction Junction". At its centre it does have one large stone, but it is described as having "no intrinsic value". In 1922 steamship owner Herbert Blackstone dedicated the junction to two of his sons, who both died of pneumonia when serving in WWI. So Blackstone Circle is a little less mundane than most traffic junctions. With more searching I found that the Lake Region of New Hampshire had a spate of UFO sightings in August 1974, including two police officers at Weirs Beach who saw "something" over the lake. The *Nashua Telegraph* of 16 August 1974 goes on to state that Laconia police had four nights of people reporting UFOs. These sightings were of inverted colour-changing coffee cups, a red, green and white saucer-shaped "hot dog" over Lake Opechee and a UFO landing on Belknap mountain.

weirsbeach.com/reasons-to-visit/atmosphere/wac/blackstone-circle/; www.newspapers.com/article/nashua-telegraph-nastelegraph-16-aug-197/3158339

Mist on the meadow

JENNY RANDLES explores cases in which weird atmospheric affects have been attributed to aliens

I have lately become intrigued by an unusual set of cases in which both weird things happen and a nontraditional UFO event occurs. Their difference from the usual type of event, with some degree of consistency across the globe, suggests to me this hints at something real that we might be able to find an explanation for in terms of atmospheric physics.

Here is one intriguing case, from Cannock Chase in Staffordshire. I was alerted to it by a reporter on a local paper and was able to set in motion an investigation by Clive Potter and his team. As I told the reporter, the place was already notorious for sightings like this. In this case, it involved two witnesses returning from a meeting in Cannock crossing the open heath and heading for Stafford just after midnight on 4 August 1988.

Approaching a bridge over the River Trent near the village of Little Hayward, Gloria, who was on the lookout for deer, called out that she could see something, so that her friend Reg, driving, could slow down. But it was not a deer. There was something very odd indeed covering the road surface.

Gloria described it as "a big cloud on the floor – all red and lit up." She added that the glow was notably fluorescent, and the inner part of it pulsated weirdly. Its sides seemed vaporous but denser in the middle, as if the mist was something separate. Reg added that it was "like a gas cloud – semi saucer shape – as if you could look through a fluorescent tube." It was spanning the road but, as they approached, it faded out as it crossed the river near the bridge, then briefly reappeared on the opposite bank.

Both witnesses independently reported what I immediately recognised as that strange state of consciousness that close encounter witnesses describe so often – the Oz Factor. Gloria remarked spontaneously: "It was dead quiet – very, very quiet. There was silence everywhere." Reg confirmed: "It was unbelievably quiet." Interestingly, Reg explained that initially he did not see it when Gloria did. Only when Gloria said she "felt weird" did he see it.

On returning home in the early hours, they called the police and were told someone would come to take a statement. Nobody ever did. The two witnesses returned in daylight to the location, finding a hedge that was crushed, with leaves dehydrated and bark stripped. Possibly also relevant, a few days after the press story the witnesses passed the remote spot again and noticed a white Land Rover parked there, with two men in overalls examining the ground carefully.

> They suspected the glowing misty object was created by ionisation of some kind

The local UFO group investigated this extremely well. Dr Michele Clare, a plant biologist, took an interest in the case and studied samples from the site. Nothing unusual was found, but she did establish that the damage to the hedge was not caused by heat. Two meteorologists also followed up the case: Dr Terence Meaden, editor of the *Journal of Meteorology*, and local resident David Reynolds. They found nothing dramatic, but felt that the proximity to the Trent and a clearing weather system with low misty drizzle that was present around that time was likely relevant. They felt that the damage to the hedge was most likely caused by the passing weather system.

As for the 'UFO', they suspected the glowing misty object was created by ionisation of some kind. I suspect these witnesses really did see a physical phenomenon caused by a rare form of atmospheric ionisation. I have come across several cases like it that support that argument. But it appears to be best described as a UAP: an unidentifiable atmospheric phenomenon.

Another intriguing case, recorded by Bill Chalker, occurred at 5.45am on 22 March 1976 at Nemingha, New South Wales. A couple in a car stopped at a small intersection to consult their map. When they noticed a car on the road ahead coming from Tamworth, they decided to flag it down and ask the best route to take. Suddenly that car lost power and lights, and coasted onto the wrong side of the road. From above, a yellow-green glow came down. As it rolled to a stop, the car was now visibly covered by a small patch of hazy white mist near its front.

Looking on after the mist had cleared, they were stunned to see a woman step out of the stricken car and use a cloth to wipe the windscreen, which had been covered by a white substance. At this point the car lights came back on of their own accord. The woman finished wiping the deposit off the windscreen, jumped into her car and drove off. As she sped away, the discarded cloth with the 'deposit' on it burst into flames. Again, here we have clear evidence of a physically real phenomenon that seems to have come from the sky and in this case affected electrical systems.

A third case is even more remarkable, and totally outside the context of UFOs. It occurred in Greytown, Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), South Africa. One late June in the 1960s, a pilot was walking with a homesteader to his landing strip, to fly to Durban, when the atmosphere became strange and the geese went silent. On the airstrip a few hundred yards below, a strange red glow had formed, iridescent and fading to pink at the edges. Yet weirder, the sheep nearby had formed themselves into an arc and were staring up at it. The witness likened the effect to how iron filings on a piece of paper array themselves when a magnet is underneath.

By now the men were walking swiftly towards the homesteader's flock and started to experience weird effects themselves. Water in the pilot's muddy boots was climbing up his leg as if being sucked – a "most uncanny experience" as he put it. Indeed, he could feel saliva being sucked into the roof of his mouth too. At this point the sheep were behaving equally strangely – standing on tiptoes on their hind legs, like ballerinas, as if they were about to take flight. Happily, whatever was causing the gravity anomaly soon stopped and the sheep were seemingly going back to normal – although one was missing and was never found. A worker on the homestead who also witnessed the event said he had finally seen the local legend of a red sun that appeared in the sky and sucked cattle up into the air.

What does all of this mean? Quite probably that there is a consistent phenomenon reported from around the world, the basis of local legends shaped across the centuries. What seems to be some rare kind of natural atmospheric effect is not today blamed on gods or witches. The aliens have taken over that mantle; although they are likely no more to blame than anything else humanity has nominated to explain these odd events.

PHANTOMS OF THE SKY

Military aircrew have reported UFOs since the birth of powered aviation. But are these puzzling sightings really chance encounters? **DAVID CLARKE** examines the stories of RAF aircrew who were haunted by flying saucers.

I was frightened. I make no bones about it. It was something supernatural, perhaps, and when I landed someone told me I looked as if I had seen a ghost.

Retired RAF Air Commodore Michael or 'Mick' Swiney made this odd comment as he relived the story of his unsettling experience in 1952 with what the Pentagon now categorises as 'unidentified anomalous phenomena' (UAP). But at the time such uncanny aerial phantoms were popularly described as 'flying saucers'. The US military acronym UFO was adopted later in that decade as the Space Race began. As one of Swiney's colleagues put it: "At that time, UFOs to aviators were like mermaids to ancient mariners, but of more substantial provenance."

Swiney's first-hand account (see p.**) first emerged in 2002 during my research for *The UFO Files*, a book first published by The National Archives to accompany the release of the MoD's UFO archive.[1] For this project I traced dozens of former British military aircrew who reported sightings during the early years of the Cold War. In 1952 Prime Minister Winston Churchill demanded a report from the Air Ministry on the 'flying saucer' mystery after a spate of sightings over Washington DC that brought renewed CIA interest (see **FT372:32-39**).

The Little Rissington incident is just one of dozens of similar observations reported by RAF and naval personnel, during the two decades that followed the end of WWII.

MICHAEL SWINEY

LEFT: Air Commodore Michael Swiney at the time of his UFO sighting at RAF Little Rissington in Gloucestershire in 1952.

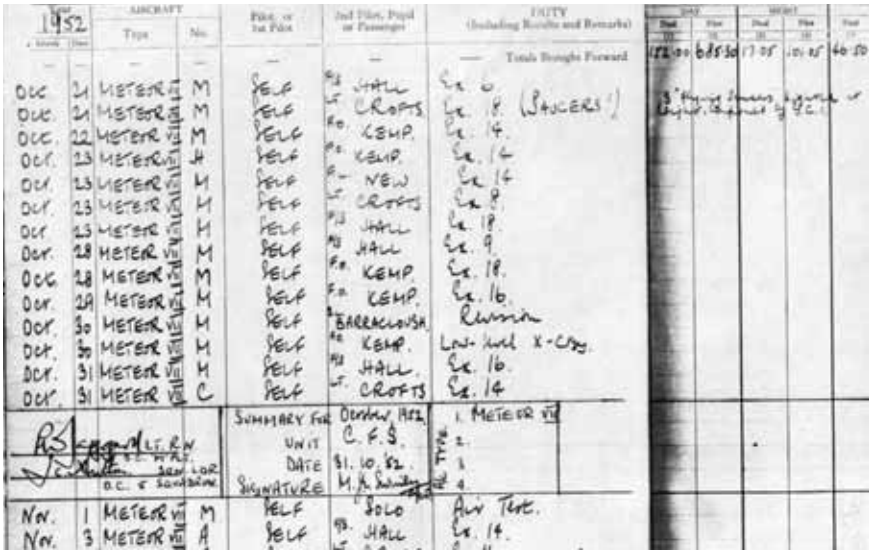
> "WHEN I LANDED SOMEONE TOLD ME I LOOKED AS IF I HAD SEEN A GHOST"

Some were never formally logged, as the observers feared ridicule or even worse. This reluctance to jeopardise military careers was a factor highlighted by the Pentagon taskforce who, in 2021, introduced new UAP reporting procedures to ensure incidents were investigated quickly. This followed the release of film footage and accounts by US Navy aircrew who have described their frequent encounters with what the US military now call UAP (see **FT403:40-42, 409 48-51**). The famous FLIR footage captured by F-18 crews first emerged in 2017; but I had followed up rumours about similar footage captured by RAF aircrew many years earlier.

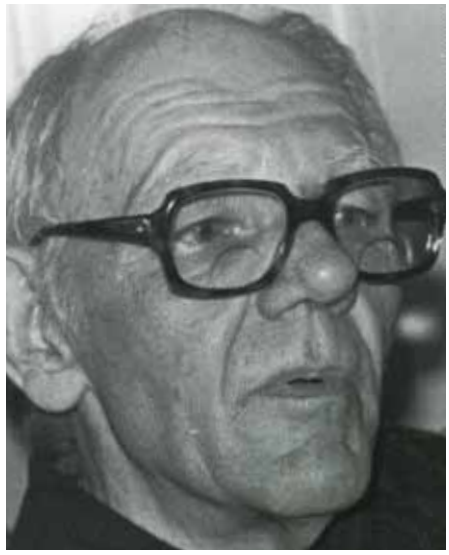
MoD official Ralph Noyes said that he saw clips of classified gun-camera material during a screening organised by the RAF at Main Building in 1970. Noyes, who died in 1998, described the material as unimpressive: "fuzzy greyish blobs in the daylight shots; small glowing globular objects in the night films." Nevertheless, it did exist and he believed the clips were shown to "test the reactions of a few of us to the unusual objects caught on film". What happened to this footage remains a mystery.[2]

I have revisited audio recordings made two decades ago to compare the accounts I collected from British aircrew with their US counterparts. This exercise made me

ILLUSTRATION: ETIENNE GILFILLAN/ADOBE STOCK/ALAMY



MICHAEL SWINEY



ABOVE LEFT: An entry from Michael Swiney's logbook, dated 21 October 1952: "3 'Flying Saucers' sighted at height. Confirmed by G.C.I." **ABOVE RIGHT:** Ralph Noyes saw classified RAF gun camera footage of aerial anomalies. **BELOW:** RAF test pilot Stan Hubbard, whose 1950 sighting triggered a secret MoD investigation.

question the assumption that these incidents are random in nature. Putting aside potential rational explanations, such as misidentifications of natural phenomena, space debris and secret projects, I considered whether it was possible, in some cases, that the presence of either the aircraft and/or human crews attracted the attention of *something*. One striking account, recalled by a radio operator from a WWII Lancaster, described how all eight crew were left "strangely transfixed" by the appearance of a huge disc-shaped UFO during a night-time bombing raid on southern France in 1944. In 2003, Ron Claridge recalled: "We had no feelings of fear, but feelings of great calm… even our gunners who would normally open fire were helpless." [3] Another pilot, flying a single-seater Vampire night fighter during a daylight exercise in 1953, said he first became aware of his UFO "when I had a strong feeling of being watched" at 35,000ft (10,670m) above Germany. As the milky-white light stayed ahead and moved from side to side, much like the behaviour of the wartime foo-fighters, "the hair rose on the back of my head… I forgot to trigger the gun camera because I was so flabbergasted." [4]

In the following year, a board of inquiry that was held to investigate the series of disasters that befell the de Havilland Comet airliners briefly considered "suggestions that the Comets might have come into contact with something like 'flying saucers', a meteorite or a stratospheric gremlin". But Sir Lionel Heald, who chaired the inquiry, dismissed these theories as "extremely remote". [5] This piece of RAF folklore persisted, as the potential threat to aircraft is mentioned in the MoD's most recent study, the Condign Report, that was completed in 2000. Author Ron Haddow, a defence scientist who specialised in radar and electronics, believed UAPs are an unknown type of dusty plasma created by meteoric impacts on the upper atmosphere (see **FT396:28-29**). He suggested that the metallic surfaces of aircraft would naturally attract such plasmas and advised the RAF to warn military crews that "no attempt should be made to out-manœuvre a UAP during interception". Civilian aircrew "should be advised not to manœuvre, other than to place astern, if possible". [6] This theory surfaced again in a controversial 2024 paper that claims similar plasmas have been captured on film in Earth orbit during the Space Shuttle missions. [7]

Putting aside the problems with this hypothesis – of which there are many – it overlooks the issue of repeater witnesses. Why would natural phenomena, if such they are, return repeatedly to visit specific aircraft or individuals?

FLYING SAUCERS OVER FARNBOROUGH

Although the 1952 experience continued to haunt him, Mick Swiney did not report any further UFO encounters. But his story came to my attention via an existing contact with one of the RAF's most experienced test pilots, Wing Commander Stanley Hubbard. His UFO sightings – both made from the ground – attracted interest from the MoD's secretive Flying Saucer Working Party whose 1951 report was used to brief Winston Churchill.

Stan Hubbard was born in York in 1921 and died age 93 in the USA – where he had emigrated – in 2014. As a young man Hubbard flew every type of experimental jet aircraft, including the Heath Robinson-like 'Flying Bedstead' that led to the development of the Harrier jump jet. From 1948 he was based at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) at Farnborough airfield in Hampshire, where he spent three years as flying tutor for the Empire Test Pilots School.

It was during his time at ETS that a series of weird events occurred that transformed

COURTESY STAN HUBBARD

COURTESY STAN HUBBARD

ABOVE: Farnborough test pilots; Stan Hubbard is fourth from the right. **BELOW:** Artist Richard Svensson's impression of the discus-like UFO seen by Stan on 14 August 1950 with its rotating peripheral rim: from which emerged a series of flickering points of light.

his life. "It all started on the late morning of 14 August 1950, a lovely Hampshire summer day, warm, dry and clear – not a cloud in the sky and not even the slightest breeze," he told me in July 2001. [8] "It was a peaceful scene and I was at peace with the world too that morning." As he set off for a stroll across the airfield, wearing sunglasses, he passed the old flying control building.

"There was no one about and I had gone about 150-200 yards when my attention was drawn to a strange distant humming sound coming from somewhere behind me, in the direction of Basingstoke," he explained. "The noise became more distinct and more intense, and I clearly remember pausing and turning mid-stride to see what it could possibly be. To say that I was astonished is a profound understatement. Coming directly towards the airfield was an object entirely unlike anything I had ever seen before." Hubbard tried to describe it: "Edge on, it looked like a discus of the type we used to hurl on sports day at school, and as it came closer, I could see that it was very similar in shape."

A flying saucer! Despite his shock, Hubbard's instincts kicked in. He tried to estimate its size and speed, despite its lack of identifying features. He guessed it was between 700 and 1,000 feet (213m-305m) in altitude when first seen and was around 100ft (30m) in diameter.

"It was coming straight towards me and was holding a straight course. But it was rocking laterally, gently from side to side about 20 degrees, round what would have been its longitudinal axis had it had one, while steadily maintaining its heading."

The weird noise grew louder. It was "a heavy dominant humming with an associated subdued crackling-hissing sound" that reminded him of the noise made by a large electrical power generator. As the disc passed overhead he could see the outer surface had "a satiny shimmering mother-of-pearl finish". The exterior "was almost entirely featureless except the periphery [that] was edged by a band of a darker colour with indistinct markings of some sort that kept changing in appearance". (See illustration, drawn by Stan Hubbard).

The crackling-hissing sound seemed to emanate from a rotating peripheral rim. Emerging from this was a series of bluish flickering of points of light "very much like the little blue flame from a gas ring on a cooking stove, but turned upside down". There was also "a concurrent smell of ozone,

RICHARD SVENNSON

"WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON?"

DAVID CLARKE talks to the RAF personnel who witnessed the Little Rissington Incident

On 21 October 1952 Michael Swiney was training a Royal Navy student, Lt David Crofts, in a Gloster Meteor VII jet from the RAF's Central Flying School at RAF Little Rissington. They punched through a layer of cloud as they climbed into the sky from the airfield in Gloucestershire. But what should have been a run-of-the-mill exercise quickly turned into one of the most dramatic experiences in Swiney's career.

"Smack in front of the cockpit were three circular objects," he told me in 2002. "Two of them were on an even keel and one of them was canted at a slight angle. I thought, 'God almighty this is three chaps coming down on parachutes' and I literally took the stick, or pole as we used to call it, out of [Lt Croft's] hand so we didn't tear through these parachutes. He issued some sort of expletive and said, 'What on Earth is going on?' and I said 'David, have a look at this!'"

Swiney, who died at the age of 90 in 2016, described the objects as circular, like flat plates, white in colour and emitting "a fuzzy iridescent light" from their edges. There were no visible signs of propulsion: no port-holes, turrets or other tell-tale signs that could have identified them as balloons or conventional aircraft seen from an unusual angle.

In a separate interview with Lt Crofts, later that year, he recalled sitting directly behind Swiney, flying the Meteor under instruction. Crofts recalled climbing out of the cloud and counting off their altitude at each 5000ft (1,524m) mark when suddenly at 30,000ft (9,144m):

"Mick said: 'David, did you have anything to drink at lunchtime? And I said: 'No, why?' and he then said 'Is your oxygen on?' and I said 'Yes, you checked with me at 30,000ft' and he then said 'Well, look at that – straight ahead'".

It was at this stage, he said, that Swiney took back control of the Meteor. He radioed ground control to report he was terminating the exercise and his intention to return to base. In the heat of the moment Crofts says he yelled "Let's go after them!" but Swiney replied: "Oh Lord no, don't you remember that case in America where a pilot went after one of these things and got vapourised."

At this point in our conversation Crofts produced a wine glass. Holding it up above his head to simulate what they both saw he said: "They were elliptical, a bit like the base of this glass and shimmered as if the Sun was behind them."

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Gloster Meteor T7 jets performing aerobatics above RAF Little Rissington, 1952. **BELOW LEFT:** David Crofts in 2002.

On return to base both men were separated, confined to their quarters, and ordered not to discuss what they had seen. The following morning an Air Ministry team arrived. Both were asked to draw what they saw. Crofts said he was told the objects had been detected by ground radar and fighter aircraft were scrambled to intercept them: "I was told the targets had a ground speed of 600 knots heading east but that the fighters saw nothing, didn't make contact and returned to base."

After their weird encounter neither Swiney nor Crofts heard anything further about the investigation. It happened 18 days after the UK detonated its first atomic bomb, making it the world's third nuclear power. As international tension grew, security was tightened up and UFO reports made by military personnel were classified as 'restricted'. In 1953, following the widely publicised Topcliffe incident, all RAF aircrew were warned not to discuss unusual sightings with "anyone other than official persons any information about phenomena they have observed, unless officially authorised to do so".

ON RETURN TO BASE, THEY WERE CONFINED TO QUARTERS AND ORDERED NOT TO DISCUSS WHAT THEY HAD SEEN

DAVID CLARKE

When in retirement Swiney tried to obtain access to his report from MoD archives he was told that all records of UFO incidents reported by aircrew had been destroyed in a clear-out of old papers. The single surviving reference at The National Archives, from the RAF Training School operations record book, confirms the basic details including radar confirmation but simply adds, cryptically: "…but Air Ministry discounted any possibility of 'extra-terrestrial objects'". In 1975 Swiney was promoted to a desk-based intelligence role and, while working in MoD Main Building, asked to see his original report. "I was shown the file," he said, "It was all there, the written statements and drawings we both made in 1952, but I don't know what happened to it since."

that normally is associated with heavy electrical discharges, and again like the odour inside a power station".

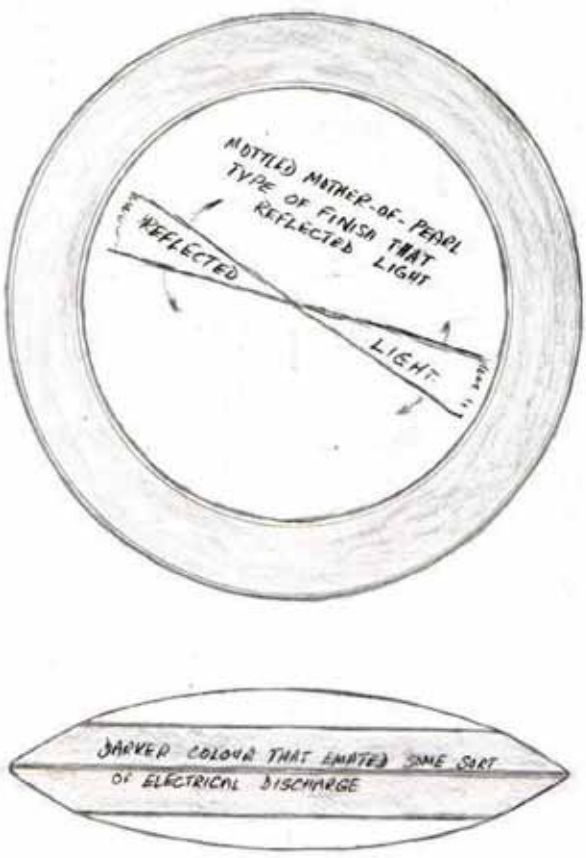
Even stranger, the object was travelling very fast – between 800-1,000mph (1,287-1,609km/h) – "but there was no sense whatsoever of air disturbance due to its passing". As it disappeared into the distance, he heard screaming and shouting from a nearby hut. A woman emerged, running towards him shouting hysterically, "Stan, did you see that awful thing?" before she turned and headed back inside the building.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Hubbard immediately reported his experience up the chain of command. But he had no way of knowing that, the very next morning, a Top Secret committee of intelligence officers was scheduled to gather for the first meeting of the Flying Saucer Working Party at the Metropole Building in London. This eccentric sounding committee was established at the insistence of Sir Henry Tizard, the MoD's Chief Scientific Advisor, who had played a leading role in the secret war waged by Churchill's scientific wizards against Nazi Germany (see **FT372:32-38**). Tizard felt reports of flying saucers "should not be discounted without investigation". At the meeting it was decided the MoD working party would be led by a senior naval intelligence officer, Graham Turney, who had worked with Ian Fleming during the war. He sent a team from air intelligence to Farnborough to quiz Hubbard.

The questions included: "How high was it? How big was it? How fast was it? What was it? Where do you think it was made?" and Hubbard recalled "one question which I think reflects the tenor of the interview was – 'what do you suppose the object was, and where would it have come from?' I replied simply that it was not something that had been designed and built on this Earth. Clearly, from the effect this had on the team, this was the wrong answer."

When the working party team returned in the following month to investigate a second Farnborough UFO sighting, the team leader exclaimed, on meeting Stan Hubbard: "Oh my goodness, not you again!" This visit followed events on the afternoon of 15 September when five senior test flight personnel, including Hubbard's boss Jack Spencer, gathered on the roof of the flying control building to watch the return of 'Wimpy' Wade. Squadron Leader Wade was chief test pilot of the Hawker Aircraft company. He had taken off 20 minutes earlier to conduct one of the first test flights of the P1081 prototype fighter jet. But as they waited an unfamiliar object appeared at an estimated 10-15 miles (16-24km) to the south. In appearance they agreed it was like the flying saucer Hubbard had reported in August – a flat disc, light pearl grey in colour and "about the size of a shirt button".


MOTTLED MOTHER-OF-PEARL TYPE OF FINISH THAT REFLECTED LIGHT
REFLECTED
LIGHT
DARKER COLOUR THAT EMITTED SOME SORT OF ELECTRICAL DISCHARGE

LEFT: Stan Hubbard's own drawing of the UFO he saw on 14 August 1950. **BELOW:** Hawker P.1081 at the Farnborough display in July 1950. Squadron Leader 'Wimpy' Wade was flying the aircraft during the second Farnborough sighting.

COURTESY STAN HUBBARD

> SIR HENRY TIZARD FELT THAT REPORTS OF FLYING SAUCERS SHOULD NOT BE DISCOUNTED WITHOUT INVESTIGATION

YORKSHIRE LATE CITY

Evening Press

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 1952. A KEMSLEY NEWSPAPER.

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TOPCLIFFE AIRMEN SIGHT A "FLYING SAUCER"

"Incredible Speed"

THE captain of a Coastal Command Shackleton aircraft at R.A.F. Station, Topcliffe, to-day told an "Evening Press" reporter about the "flying saucer" which he saw while he was standing near a hangar on the station.

He is Flight Lieutenant John William Kilburn (31), of Thornhill, Cumberland, who has been in the R.A.F. for 16 years, 11 of them as aircrew. He said: "I noticed a white object and assumed that its height was between 10,000 and 20,000 feet. It was five miles astern of a Meteor jet aircraft. It was silver in colour, circular in shape and looked to be solid. The sun was glistening on it.

"It appeared to be travelling at a much slower speed than the Meteor but on a similar course. It maintained its slow forward speed for several seconds before it started to descend, then began swinging with a pendulum action, something similar to a falling sycamore leaf.

"I thought it might be a parachute or an engine coming in that path.

"The Meteor turned towards Driffield, and the object followed suit. After a few seconds it stopped its pendulum motion and started to rotate about its own axis. It then took off at an incredible speed and went turning gently out before disappearing."

MATTER OF SECONDS

'Flu? Grin And Bear It

A COMMITTEE of the World Health Organisation has spent five days discussing influenza, and its verdict—the world cannot control influenza.

The chairman, M. Pierre Lepine, reported that there are so many different types of influenza virus that experts never know which type of vaccine to prepare in advance.

The development of an epidemic is too swift for a vaccine to be prepared in time to deal with a particular outbreak.—M.O.P.

£500 Bail For Estate Agent

ARRESTED last night by Chief Inspector Ellis and other detectives, Vivat Stead, estate agent, Patrick Mansion, Harrogate, motorist and estate agent, Frances Ruth Ward, [illegible]

12 Months For Crystal-Gazer

A CLAIRVOYANT, John D'Arcy (38), was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment to-day, at Hastings Borough Quarter Sessions, and Ray Metcalf (31), a writer, to six months' imprisonment, on charges of conspiring to defraud a widow, who, it was stated, was told during a crystal-gazing incident at Bexhill that she would "marry a dark young man."

They were jointly charged with conspiring together between June 13 and July 18 to defraud Mrs. Agnes Frances Drake, of St. Matthew's Gardens, St. Leonards, "of such moneys as she might be induced to part with by false representations."

Metcalf was also charged with stealing a diamond ring value £100, the property of Mrs. Drake, and alternatively with fraudulently converting the ring given to him to have the gold taken out and made into a clip.

He was found not guilty on charges relating to the diamond ring. Both had pleaded not guilty.

When the case was resumed to-day, D'Arcy was questioned by Mr. Rodney Noakes, prosecuting, who asked, "Have you nothing but the gift of clairvoyance to help you to earn a normal livelihood?" D'Arcy replied, "Yes, I was. I described

CAR OUTPUT, EXPORTS ARE DOWN

JULY FIGURES

July exports of cars, 21,302, valued at £20,000,000, although higher in volume and value than in June, were below the monthly average figures for the first half of the year.

Commercial vehicle shipments for July, 11,916, valued at almost £7,500,000, were higher than comparable figures a year

Sunday Dispat

What Intruded Into 'Exercise Main

'SAUCER' CHASED JET PLANE

Say

Airme

NOT Smoke-Ring Or Weather Balloon, Says Pilot

By Sunday Dispatch Reporter

SERIOUS investigation was being made last night by the R.A.F. into the mystery of a silvery-white object that chased a Meteor jet-plane over Yorkshire during "Exercise Mainbrace."

It was seen by two R.A.F. officers and three aircrew as they stood near Coastal Command Shackleton Squadron H.Q. at Topcliffe.

ABOVE: Headlines from the *Yorkshire Evening Press* and *Sunday Disptach* from September 1952. **BELOW:** Sir Henry Tizard, who established the MoD's top secret Flying Saucer Working Party in 1950.

"I said: 'Hey Jack, what do you think that is?' pointing… and he shouted: 'MY GOD! Go get a camera, quick… go get some binoculars'… and for a few minutes it was pandemonium…"

But Hubbard said the movements of *this* UFO were different: "From fluttering, as though bordering on instability, in a hovering mode, the object would swoop off in a slight dive at incredibly high speed, then stop abruptly and go into another fluttering hover mode. This performance was repeated many times, frequently with some change of height, and it appeared all this was going on eight to 10 miles [13–16km] south" in the direction of Guildford. Here Hubbard provided a detailed account of what ufologists call 'the falling leaf motion'. The 1964 NICAP publication *The UFO Evidence* refers to this as "a curious, but fairly common, flight characteristic of UFOs", but outside the capabilities of man-made technology. It is a "pendulum-like motion (swaying back and forth) during hovering, slow climb, or descent" that witnesses have often compared to the gyrations of a falling leaf (see **FT360:29**).

The MoD working party report states that all five men "observed it [the disc] to follow a rectangular flight path, consisting in succession of a 'falling leaf', horizontal flight 'very fast', an upward 'falling leaf', another horizontal stretch, and so on; finally it dived to the horizon at great speed" and vanished.

Hubbard says all five test pilots were awestruck. "I remember Jack Spencer saying 'Sorry Stan, I didn't believe those stories. But seeing is believing!'" Nevertheless, the MoD Working Party was not impressed. The team dismissed Hubbard's belief that the objects he saw on the two occasions were identical. In respect of his first sighting, the team said they found it "impossible to believe that a

SUPERSTOCK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

most unconventional aircraft, of exceptional speed, could have travelled at no great altitude, in the middle of a fine summer morning, over a populous and air-minded district like Farnborough, without attracting the attention of more than one observer." The report did not mention the woman in the hut, but did say two other airmen on base heard a strange noise at the same time but "saw nothing".

They concluded that Hubbard "was the victim of an optical illusion" or that he observed some quite normal aircraft and was deceived by its shape and speed. The same methodology was employed to dismiss the second sighting: "We conclude the officers in fact saw some quite normal aircraft, manœuvring at extreme visual range, and were led by [their knowledge of Hubbard's] previous report to believe it to be something abnormal – an interesting example of one report influencing another." [9]

The MoD team told Hubbard and his colleagues the subject was "highly classified" and they were not to discuss it with anyone. They were not allowed to see the conclusions reached by the team and their report was subsequently lost in the MoD's chaotic files until 2001 when I obtained a copy, using the precursor to the Freedom of Information Act. I posted a copy to Hubbard at his home in Virginia. On reading the report he responded: "Absolute rubbish. I feel quite insulted." In retrospect, Hubbard believes the team were amateurs "who didn't get anything right". Whether this agenda was deliberate he did not know but, much like Swiney and Crofts, he felt they were going through the motions and did not have power or resources to investigate properly. "We as test pilots were properly trained as our lives depended upon it," Hubbard said, reflecting on the death of Wimpy Wade in a crash one year after these events. "We were constantly being cross-checked and prided ourselves on being accurate observers, even under duress, in a spinning aircraft when you are being thrown around in the cockpit."

THAT FLYING SAUCER MAN

But Hubbard was not done with flying saucers. Indeed, his story – although supposedly classified 'secret' – became so well known in elite circles that on one occasion, at Tactical Air Command HQ at Langley, Virginia, he was greeted by the visiting British Secretary of State for the RAF, Julian Amery, who shook his hand and said: "I know you. You are that flying saucer man!" Taken aback, Hubbard said he had been told not to discuss his experiences with anyone. "[The Minister] just said 'Oh right, well, we'd better not say anymore then, jolly good'… and he just walked away. I couldn't believe it!"

Despite being prone to 'optical illusions',

COURTESY STAN HUBBARD

DAVID CLARKE

ABOVE LEFT: Stan Hubbard meeting Julian Amery, Secretary for State for Air in 1961. Amery apparently said "I know you. You are that flying saucer man!"
ABOVE RIGHT: Stan Hubbard photographed in 2002.

after leaving Farnborough, Hubbard was appointed to fly Meteor jets as commander of 92 Squadron based in his native Yorkshire. September 1952 marked the 12th anniversary of the Battle of Britain and for a week Hubbard's squadron was involved in flypasts and aerobatic displays at airfields across the north of England. The displays peaked on 19/20 September, a date that coincided with NATO exercise Mainbrace that aimed to simulate a Soviet attack on northern Europe. Hundreds of ships and planes from eight countries were involved – and the UFOs were out in force (for more, see Jenny Randles, "Splicing the Mainbrace", parts one and two, **FT425:29, 426:27**).

According to Captain Edward Ruppelt, head of the US Air Force's re-launched Project Blue Book, it was the Topcliffe incident that officially led the RAF to "officially recognise the UFO". One of the best-known reports during Mainbrace came from RAF Topcliffe in North Yorkshire, on the morning of 19 September. This sighting made news headlines across the world and has become one of the iconic military UFO reports from the 1950s.

A group of 10 officers and RAF Shackleton aircrew observed a disc-shaped object that appeared to follow a Meteor jet as it descended towards Dishforth airfield nearby. The saucer appeared at a height of 10-20,000ft (3,048-6,096m), five miles (8km) astern of the descending aircraft. According to a statement made by Flt Lt John Kilburn to Air Ministry: "…the object was silver in colour and circular in shape" as it followed the jet but then began to descend "swinging in a pendular motion… similar to a falling sycamore leaf" – much like the aerial performance witnessed by Hubbard and his fellow test pilots at Farnborough two years earlier.

Initially, Kilburn and the Shackleton crews feared the tumbling object was a parachute or a piece of engine cowling that had detached from the jet aircraft; but as the Meteor turned towards Dishforth, the circular object suddenly halted its descent and followed, rotating along its own axis. "Suddenly it accelerated at an incredible speed towards the west, turning onto a south-easterly heading before disappearing," Kilburn reported: "All this occurred in a matter of 15 to 20 seconds. The movements of the object were not identifiable with anything I have seen in the air and the rate of acceleration was unbelievable." [10]

The surviving records do not reveal what, if anything, the Meteor crew saw. But it is possible the jet was from Hubbard's squadron that was based at nearby RAF Linton-on-Ouse. Was his saucer putting on a third and final spectacular display for his benefit? In 2002 Stan Hubbard invited me to join him for lunch at the RAF Club in London. I took the opportunity to ask him what he thought was going on in 1950-1952.

"I have no idea, but looking back the whole series of events left me feeling like I was being haunted by some *thing*," he admitted. "I tried to make sense of it using my scientific training, but it was so weird that it makes me question everything I know about the rules of physics.

"I don't know what it was I saw, but I *know* what I saw. This was 52 years ago. Even today, we have nowhere near the technology that would be required to produce an object of that sort and capable of that performance. The stability, the speed capability the acceleration, the deceleration, the manœuvrability, and performance. There was absolutely no way this was of this Earth."

NOTES

1 *The UFO Files: The Inside Story of Real-life Sightings*, by David Clarke. First edition published by The National Archives 2009; 2nd edition Bloomsbury 2012. A second-hand account was published in *Sounds From Another Room* (1996) the autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Peter Horsley.

2 TNA DEFE 24/1996/1: Noyes wrote to his former colleagues in 1987 to request a search of surviving records for the gun camera footage. He was told no trace had been found and the footage had probably been destroyed.

3 *UFO Drawings from The National Archives*, by David Clarke (Four Corners books 2017), pp.27-29.

4 Interview with Ken Senar, 93 Squadron RAF, June 2005.

5 TNA AVIA 13/1363: Public responses to the Comet disaster 1954.

6 TNA DEFE 24/3356/1 UAPs in the UK Air Defence Region vol 3.

7 R Joseph and C Impey, et al: "Extraterrestrial Life in the Thermosphere: Plasmas, UAP, Pre-Life, Fourth State of Matter", *Journal of Modern Physics* 15/3 (February 2024).

8 Personal communication from Stan Hubbard 2001; interview 2002.

9 TNA DEFE 44/119: DSI/JTIC report no 7, 1951.

10 TNA AIR 16/119: Flying Saucers: reports from RAF Topcliffe.

DR DAVID CLARKE is an Associate Professor at Sheffield Hallam University, a consultant for The National Archives UFO project and a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*. He is the author of *How UFOs Conquered the World: The History of a Modern Myth* (2015).

TALES FROM THE NEW MILLENNIUM

PART THREE

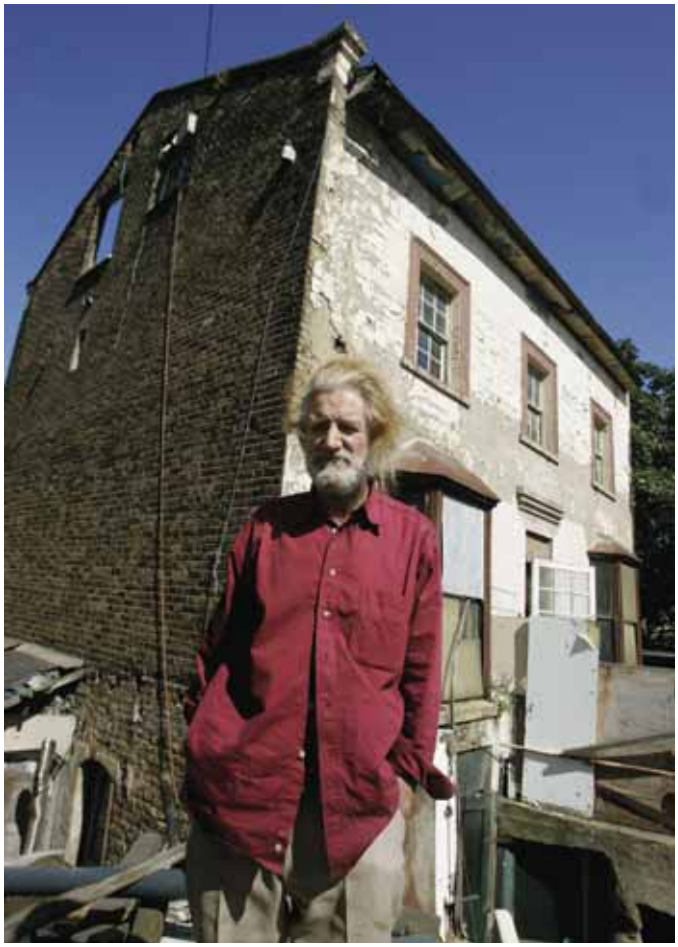
For four decades up to 2019, Paul Sieveking selected and wrote up weird news stories for Fortean Times. In this third instalment, we reprint some of his favourite news reports from the years 2006 to 2009, including tadpole rains, a weird winged entity and a boy who cried tears of blood...

MOLE MAN EVICTED

Since the early 1960s, William Lyttle, 75, had been pursuing his idea of home improvements by tunnelling under his derelict Victorian house, 121 Mortimer Road, Hackney, northeast London. Originally from Northern Ireland, the eccentric retired electrical engineer known as the Mole Man inherited the four-storey, 20-room house – which in good condition would have been worth at least £1 million – from his parents. No one knew how far the tunnel network stretched; but according to Hackney Council, which used ultrasound scanners to ascertain the extent of the problem, almost half a century of nibbling dirt with a shovel and homemade pulley had hollowed out a web of tunnels and caverns, some 8m (26ft) deep, spreading up to 20m (66ft) in every direction from his house. Surveyors estimated that he had removed 100 cubic metres (3,530 cu ft) of earth.

Concerned for years at Lyttle's troglodytic activities, the Council won a court order on 28 July 2006 to evict him temporarily from his now roofless home so that it could fill the tunnels with cement to stabilise the house and the road. This was expected to cost around £100,000 – for which Lyttle would be billed. The Mole Man had not taken up the Council's offer of bed-and-breakfast accommodation and had, as it were, gone to ground. Meanwhile, engineers removed more than 20 tonnes of excavated soil and assorted rubbish from the back yard.

In 2001, the pavement in front of the house collapsed, yielding a wide gash in the road. "You could see all the tunnels sprawling out all over the place inside – it was crazy," said one woman who lives nearby. In a television documentary on great DIY disasters that year, the Mole Man proudly displayed his excavation technique. "This is how the pyramids were built – with blood, sweat and toil," he told the camera. Many of his tunnels were big enough to stand up in. "This is going to be the leisure centre," he said, sweeping his hand around a large cavern. "And this in here will be the sauna." However, many of the tunnels were filled with junk and scrap, while makeshift scaffolding poles and jacks acted as pit props to stop the house collapsing like a pack of cards.



ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT & FACING PAGE: Willam Lyttle, the Hackney Mole Man, photographed at his house on Mortimer Road.

"I often used to joke that I expect him to come tunnelling up through the kitchen floor," said Marc Beishon, who lives a few yards from the Mole Man's house. "We moved in six years ago and we've been complaining to the Council ever since," said his wife Joy. "Until six weeks ago they had the audacity to tell us the house was structurally sound. The whole of the opposite street lost power one day after he tapped into a 450-volt cable."

In all his years of digging, the Mole Man never offered a simple explanation for why he went on tunelling. "I don't mind the title of inventor," he said. "Inventing things that don't work is a brilliant thing, you know. People are asking you what the big secret is. And you know what? There isn't one." *D.Mirror, 1 Aug; Hackney Gazette, 3 Aug; Guardian, 8 Aug; Times, 9 Aug 2006.* **FT215:4**

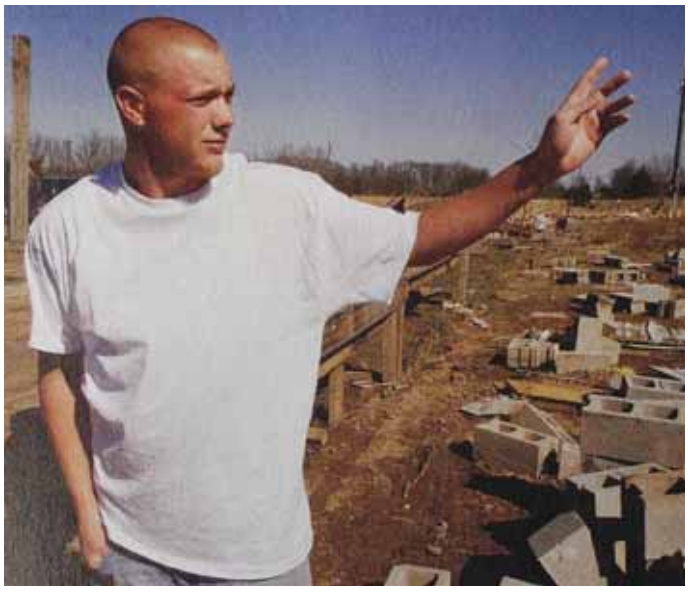
ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

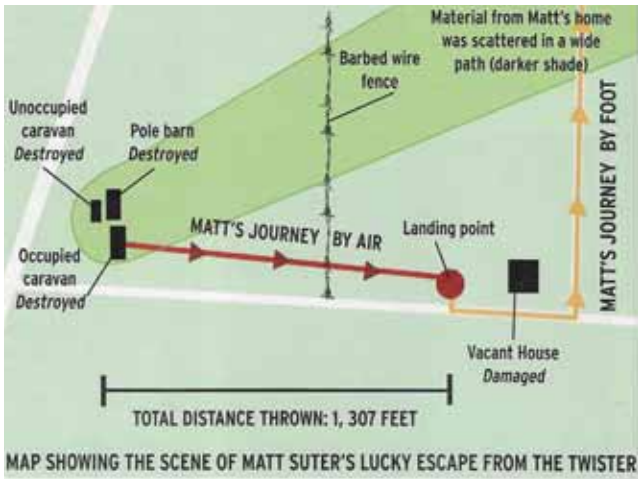
RIDING THE WHIRLWIND

On the night of 12 March 2006, Matt Suter, 19, was watching television in his boxer shorts in the trailer he shared with his grandmother and uncle in Fordland, Missouri, when he heard a jet-like roar. He was trying to shut a window in the living room, and his grandmother was in the kitchen, when the tornado struck. "The window busted, and the door got sucked out," he said. "I looked at my grandmother, and the walls were like Jell-O. The trailer was rocking back and forth. I jumped between the coffee table and couch, and I remember the trailer tipping." His grandmother, Linda Kelley, said: "I turned around to look at where he was, and that whole end of the trailer was just gone."

A large heavy glass lamp struck Suter on the top of his head, knocking him unconscious. When he came to, he found himself in a soft, grassy pasture 1,307ft (398m) from the trailer site. He ran in bare feet along a gravel road to the residence of a neighbour, who called 911. Ambulances went to the destroyed trailer, where Linda Kelley and Robert Dewhirst (Suter's uncle) lay injured. Kelley was wedged between a table and kitchen cabinets, and Dewhirst was pinned between two mattresses.

Suter himself suffered a cut on his head that required five staples, and his feet were badly bruised from running on the gravel. He remembered nothing about his flight over the pasture. He landed about 25ft (7.6m) from a gravel road and a barbed-wire fence.




Material from Matt's home was scattered in a wide path (darker shade)
Barbed wire fence
Unoccupied caravan Destroyed
Pole barn Destroyed
MATT'S JOURNEY BY AIR
Landing point
Occupied caravan Destroyed
MATT'S JOURNEY BY FOOT
Vacant House Damaged
TOTAL DISTANCE THROWN: 1, 307 FEET
MAP SHOWING THE SCENE OF MATT SUTER'S LUCKY ESCAPE FROM THE TWISTER

LEFT & ABOVE: Nineteen-year-old Matt Suter survived being thrown 1,307 feet by a tornado. **BELOW:** Darryl R Peebles of Graham, South Carolina, USA, and Daryl R Peebles of Tasmania appear on *The Tonight Show*.

A piece of paper from the trailer lay next to him. "The way it tore the walls and roof out of the trailer, I'm sure it sucked me up into the wind," he said. "I'm really glad I was unconscious."

Tom Grazulis, a Vermont meteorologist and author of *The Tornado: Nature's Ultimate Windstorm* (2001), said he knew of no one who had been tornado-tossed more than 400ft (120m) and lived – apart from one nine-year-old girl and her pony who survived a 1,000ft (300m) flight in 1955. "People who get tossed a quarter of a mile get killed in the air or in the fall or were dead when they were lifted up," he said. To live through his ordeal, Suter must have been lifted straight up and managed to avoid being struck by whatever debris went up with him. *[AP] Kansas City Star, 22 Mar 2006.* **FT211:26**

• Mr Grazulis had perhaps not heard of two Chinese reports from the 1980s. In May 1985, a tornado in Hubei province allegedly carried a middle-aged woman holding an umbrella 1,650ft (503m), and a year later a freak wind roared across the oasis of Hami in western China, allegedly sucking 13 children into the air and carrying them 12 miles (19km) before depositing them in sand dunes. They were found two days later, suffering only from scratches caused by the swirling sands (see **FT47:42**).

SNAP!

In 2004, Darryl R Peebles, a clergyman from Graham, South Carolina, typed his name into an Internet search engine and discovered another Daryl R Peebles living in Tasmania. In July 2006, the Taswegian travelled to North Carolina to meet his namesake. He drove through the streets of Graham in a stretch limo with a police escort. Children lined the streets, waving flags and holding banners. The local cinema had the words "Welcome Daryl" displayed in huge letters. The convoy stopped outside a church, where giant Australian and US flags were hanging from a fire engine's ladder. Workers rolled out a red carpet. Scores of kids threw streamers and squealed. The Taswegian emerged from the limo and was led up a carpet by a man in a yellow kangaroo costume and someone else dressed as a Tasmanian Devil.

The two Daryls found they had more in common than their unusual name. Both were born in 1949 and both had three children, one of whom was born in 1975 and another in 1977. The fathers of both men came from small towns and worked on a lathe; in the case of the Taswegian, the small town was called Penguin, and his father worked on a lathe in the paper mill at Burney. Both men were amateur singers, magicians and ventriloquists. They were planning a two-man variety show. *ABC News, 8 July 2006.* **FT216:11**

NINE MONTHS OF DRIFTING

On what was supposed to be a three-week shark-fishing trip, a group of Mexican fishermen left El Limón, near San Blas, in the Mexican state of Nayait, on 28 October 2005. The mooring line broke in deep water and petrol for the two outboard motors ran out, leaving the 27ft (8m) fibreglass boat at the mercy of the Pacific's powerful trade winds. Jesús Eduardo Vidaña López, Salvador Ordoñez Vásquez, and Lucio Rendón Beccera were eventually picked up on 9 August 2006, near Baker Island, 5,500 miles (8,800km) away, by the Taiwanese tuna boat *Koo's 102*, and were taken to the Marshall Islands. They had drifted westwards for nine months and nine days. They kept a note of the days by scoring notches on the wooden deck. Besides, one of the fishermen had a watch that showed the months and the days.

They had no radio or mobile phone on board and only a few days' supply of water and food. To survive, they dismantled their engines and used cables and wires to fashion fishing lines and hooks. "We ate raw seagulls and fish," Vidal, 27, told Mexico's *Televisa* news network from the *Koo's 102*. "We ate everything raw. Any fish that came near the boat we grabbed it and gulped it down." They put rags out to collect rainwater, then squeezed the cloths over their mouths. Although rain fell nearly every day, food was less common. "Sometimes our stomachs hurt because we would go up to

PAUL DRINKWATER / NBCU PHOTO BANK / NBCUNIVERSAL VIA GETTY IMAGES

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Mexican fishermen Salvador Ordonez (left) Jesus Vidana (centre) and Lucio Rendon (right), who spent nine months drifting at sea over a distance of 5,500 miles. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Don Karkos and the horse that restored his sight. **BELOW:** Twelve-year-old Sarita Bista, who 'shed' pieces of glass through her head.

15 days without eating," said Vidal. "There were times when we had only one bird to share among the three of us."

The men fended off despair with readings from the Bible. They drifted for weeks without seeing another vessel until they began to cross the trade routes of the east. Many times they saw ships coming towards them and jumped up and down on the deck with joy, expecting imminent rescue; when the ships passed by, they cried in anguish. "We never lost hope because there's a God Almighty and I have a lot of faith in Him," said Vidal. "I knew He was going to help us... Our feet are swollen, our arms are swollen, but we're not in that bad shape." In fact, the men were in *such* good shape that many doubted they had been at sea as long as they claimed.

One report, citing Eugene Muller, manager of the shipping company that owned the *Koo's 102*, said that two other crew members who set out from Mexico with the men had jumped overboard in the first days of their ordeal and were now presumed dead – but the men made no mention of lost crewmates in their first interview. Ordoñez later admitted that there had been two others with them – a deckhand nicknamed El Farcero and a man called Juan who had hired them for the fishing expedition. "Juan never wanted to eat raw food," he said. "He vomited. Time passed and he began to vomit blood." The two men died after three months, and the survivors prayed over the bodies before burying them at sea – although some suspected cannibalism had taken place.

Back in Mexico, many of the fishermen's friends and relatives had given them up for dead, but some never lost hope. "My mother refused to pray the novena for him," said Remigio Rendón. "She said Lucio was still alive – and she was right." *BBC News, 16 Aug; Times, Int. Herald Tribune, Independent, 17+25 Aug; Guardian, 26 Aug; Observer, 27 Aug 2006.* **FT215:5**

SHEDDING SHARDS

Sarita Bista, 12, attended an English boarding school in Kailai, western Nepal. After she fainted in 2003, a blister on the side of her forehead started to bleed and a sliver of glass came out. Since then, she had regularly shed further triangular pieces of glass. She once produced 12 shards from her skull in one day. The girl, who was under constant medical observation, had emitted more than 130 pieces of glass, averaging 4cm (1.6in) in length and 1mm breadth, since 18 January 2006. During the six weeks following 7 August, she emitted shards every day, usually between 9am and 12am. Many hailed her as a spiritual prodigy. Baffled doctors were seeking help from scientists at the Nepal Academy for Science and Technology (NAST). Her mother, Dhansara, said Sarita sometimes passed out when she began to emit the shards, adding that her daughter had never met with any accident. She appeared physically fine, said her mother, and was suffering no pain or ill effects from the phenomenon. *Kantipur on line, 21 Sept; D.Express, 24 Oct 2006.* (For the case of a Lebanese girl apparently "weeping" glass shards in 1996, see **FT94:20**.) **FT218:23**

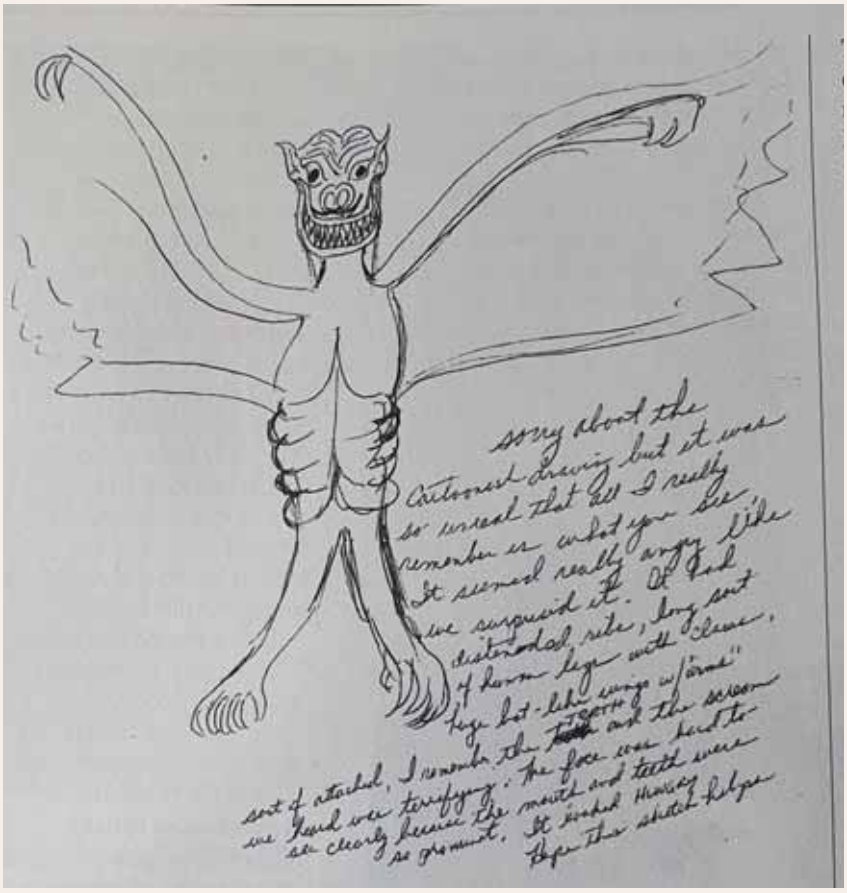
A GOOD KICK IN THE HEAD

A World War II veteran blinded in one eye could see again after being head-butted by a pedigree racehorse. Don Karkos, 82, a paddock security guard, lost the vision in his right eye after shrapnel gashed his forehead in an explosion aboard the tanker *USS Rapaden* in 1942. He got his vision back in October 2006 after colliding with My Buddy Chimo, a horse he had worked with for three years at Monticello, 90 miles (145km) north of Manhattan.

"I was putting a [collar] around his chest, and he whacked me real hard with his head," said Karkos. "It was totally out of character. He's been a good horse, very well mannered, and then he did this. Being kicked is part of the job, but I've never been hit that hard. I was pretty shaken up, kind of dazed. Then later that night I started to get the vision back in my right eye. It was unbelievable. I've been seeing doctors all my life, and they've always told me there is nothing can be done." The blow was in exactly the same spot as the shrapnel 64 years earlier. Though his vision still wasn't perfect, Karkos said he could now see about 15ft (4.6m) with his damaged eye. He can now see the wide horizon and what's coming round the corner. "I'm on very good terms with that horse now," he said, "and he gets special care from me."

Dr Douglas Lozzaro, chief of ophthalmology at Long Island College Hospital, said the blow could have knocked the dislocated lens into place. "Commonly, especially in the past, doctors would have been very reluctant to do anything because of the strong possibility that there was also damage to the back of the eye," he said. *Times-Herald Record (Monticello, NY), 13 Dec; NY Daily News, 18 Dec 2006.* **FT224:10**

For other cases of sight and hearing unexpectedly restored, see ***FT31:40, 42:5,19, 43:31-32, 53:28-30, 57:31, 93:19, 98:19, 139:14, 144:12, 208:12.***


sorry about the
Cartoonist drawing but it was
so unreal that at I really
remember is what you see
It seemed really angry like
we surprised it. It had
distended ribs, long snout
4 horn legs with claws.
Eye bat-like wings w/arms"
sort of stalked, I remember the
we heard was terrifying. the face was head to
as clearly human the mouth and teeth were
so prominent. It sinked thinner
Upon the sketch helper

ABOVE: A witness sketch of the bizarre bat-winged entity reported from Wisconsin in 2007.

WISCONSIN HUMANOID

A 53-year-old man from La Crosse, Wisconsin, and his 25-year-old son were driving on Briggs Road in Holmen, Wisconsin, at 9.30pm on 26 September 2006 when a frightening winged humanoid flew at the windshield, ascending straight up into the night sky just inches before striking the glass. The older man – who asked reporter Linda Godfrey to keep his identity secret and use his Cherokee name, Wohali – said the creature had leathery wings like a bat, with a span of 10ft to 12ft (3m to 3.6m). It had pronounced ribs, human-like legs with claws for toes and arm-like appendages tipped with claws. Its eyes glowed yellow and its face had a snarling expression, with rows of sharp teeth. It gave an unearthly howl as it flew out of sight. Both Wohali and his son became violently sick, and Wohali remained ill for a week after the encounter.

Forteans will recall various winged humanoids from the literature, the most famous being Mothman from West Virginia and the Cornish Owlman. Godfrey included the episode in her book *Strange Wisconsin*. She pointed out that the deer carcass found at the site of the encounter had no provable connection to the humanoid other than location and a crude time proximity, and that most likely it was the result of mundane poaching. *Coulee News (West Salem, WI), 4 Jan 2007.* **FT223:10**

'BIGFOOT' IN INDIA

The remote Garo Hills district of Meghalaya in north-eastern India, near the borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan, was gripped by cryptozoological speculation after at least six Garo villagers claimed to have seen the 8ft (2.4m) tall, ape-like creature, known locally as the *mande burung* (jungle man), in separate forest sightings between Nokrek and Chokpot during three weeks in late May and early June 2007. "The sight was frightening – two adults and two smaller ones, huge, bulky and furry," said Wallen Sangma, a 40-year-old farmer, who claimed to have seen the creatures from a distance of about 100 to 130ft (30-40m). "Their heads looked as if they were wearing caps, and their colour was somewhat blackish brown. The four of them quietly vanished into the thick undergrowth." At the time, Sangma was looking for firewood in a thickly forested area near the village of Rongcekgre, about 220 miles (350km) from the state capital Shillong. Another sighting was made by Abu Marak, who lived near Durabanda in the West Garo Hills.

The Garos, mostly Christian but some animist, believe in the existence of *mande burung*, which is the subject of many legends. There are stories of villagers being abducted and breastfed by a female *mande burung*, a familiar trope in US Bigfoot lore. Before the current flap, the last alleged sighting was at Rongrigittim in South Garo Hills in July 2005, but the best sighting data was recorded between January and March 2002.

"There is no denying the fact that *mande burung* does exist in the Garo Hills and it would be too simplistic to write it off as some bear or gorilla or a figment of imagination," said Llewellyn R Marak, a noted writer and winner of India's highest literary prize, the Sahitya Akademi Award. A local group called the Achik Tourism Society has been investigating the *mande burung* reports since 1997. "We started our data collection on 15 November 1997, when the creature was first seen near Andol Chiring in South Garo Hills," said Dipu N Marak, general secretary of the Society. "We have taken photographs and video images of the footprints of the creature and their nesting impressions. The footprints were 13 to 15 inches [33-38cm] long."

Dipu Marak maintained the creatures were herbivorous and survived on wild berries, bananas, plantain tree shoots, bark and roots. "They make a nest kind of thing using thatch and leaves with no roof – just walls," he said. The Society members quoted villagers encountering the creature almost every year in various parts of the region. They claimed to have collected *mande burung* hair samples from the forest, which they hoped to have DNA-tested.

Curious locals had started venturing into the wilds to look for the creature, and Indian authorities announced that a team of wildlife officials and other experts would conduct a study into the rumours. "Maybe only the fortunate ones have the chance to catch a glimpse of the *mande burung*," said Abu Marak, a local who claims to have seen the monster around 18 June. The President of the Achik Tourism Society is TK Marak, a zoology professor at the state-run university in Tura, 200 miles (320km) west of Shillong. FT wonders why nearly everyone involved is called Marak… *Telegraph (Calcutta), 4 June; Indo-Asian News Service, 9 June; Mongabay.com, 10 June 2007.*

According to the *Epoch Times* (13-19 June 2007), *mande burung* "is all set to become the mascot for a sprawling 800sq/km [300 sq mile] biosphere reserve where the group [the Achik Tourism Society] is planning 'Chase-the-Monster' tours through rainforests, waterfalls and stalactite caves."

FT is put in mind of the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan, 253 sq miles (655 sq/km) of temperate rhododendron and pine forests in the eastern part of the country, specifically created some years ago to protect the habitat of the yeti, known in Bhutan as the *migoi* or "strong man". The

PAUL MILLER / EPA / SHUTTERSTOCK

ABOVE: Demi-Lee Brennan, the first transplant patient to switch blood groups, with Dr Stephen Alexander (l) and Dr Stuart Dorney (r) at Sydney's Westmead Hospital.

Sanctuary was upgraded in 2005 with the help of a US$700,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Sceptics suggest the *migoi* is actually a Tibetan bear, a rare species related to the grizzly, that places its back foot in the footprint of its front foot while travelling through snow, thus giving the appearance of a two-legged animal; but if the Bhutanese believed this, they probably would have created a bear sanctuary. *Tidepool, 22 July; Gainesville (FL) Sun: 22 Sept. 2005.* **FT228:8**

HOMING CROCODILES

Three homesick crocodiles fitted with tracking devices shocked Australian experts by swimming hundreds of miles back 'home' after being relocated. Saltwater crocodiles caught near popular Australian beaches and rivers are often shipped to more remote areas – but this policy was now questioned, since it seemed the animals had a strong homing instinct. "We often thought crocodiles tired very quickly, but here we show very clearly that they are capable of moving long distances for days on end," said Professor Craig Franklin from the University of Queensland. One large croc was trapped in the Wenlock River on the west coast of Queensland's rugged Cape York Peninsula on 16 August 2004 and flown by helicopter to Temple Bay on the east coast. It spent three months exploring its new location, but then, between 4 December and 24 December, it made its way 255 miles (410km) round the coast back to the Wenlock River. Two other crocodiles in the experiment also explored their new locations before eventually returning to where they had been captured; one swam 60 miles (97km) in 15 days, the other 32 miles (51km) in five days. Professor Franklin said they probably used the Sun, magnetic fields, sight and smell to navigate. "Crocodiles are more closely related to birds than they are to any other reptile, so they are possibly using navigation systems similar to birds," he added. *BBC News, 27 Sept; D.Mail, 28 Sept 2007.* **FT231:12**

HYPNO-HEIST

On 24 September 2007, two Punjabi men in turbans entered the Marlborough Country Convenience Store in Marlborough, New Hampshire, and told storeowner Yogesh Patel, 29, that they were *guruji* (religious adepts) and that they could read minds. They asked him what his favourite flower was, and opened a paper with the correct answer on it: "Rose". They told him to think of a wild animal, and they again had written down his choice. Then they asked for personal information involving family members and a former girlfriend. "They also said my wife's name, that not too many people know," Patel said. "My mom's name, they told me. And they told me what was my future goal."

Patel told police later that the men somehow hypnotised him into giving them more than $1,000. A surveillance tape showed him putting cash into a hollowed-out book before getting more money from the safe. Mr Patel said that he had heard of the scam but never believed it and never thought it could happen to him. Hypnosis is measured by the Stanford Susceptibility Scales, which range from 0 (where the subject doesn't respond to any hypnotic suggestions) to 12 (where they respond to them all); 95 per cent of the population scores one or higher.

Marlborough has only two convenience stores. Police said the Punjabis stopped at the other one and asked the woman at the till where the Indian-owned store was. One of the men was aged between 35 and 40 and weighed 200lb (90kg); the other was between 50 and 60 and weighed about the same. They were thought to be driving a white Acura with New York plates. *WMUR9 (New Hampshire), 26 Sept 2007.* **FT235:9**

For other examples of hypno-theft, see: ***FT50:21*** *(Sicily);* ***60:12, 79:48*** *(Colombia);* ***72:9*** *(Thailand);* ***93:10*** *(Italy, Indonesia);* ***98:8*** *(India);* ***120:7*** *(Philippines);* ***126:9*** *(Norfolk);* ***139:8*** *(Malaysia);* ***155:20*** *(Holland, Australia);* ***176:28, 201:20*** *(Russia).*

BLOOD GROUP SWITCH

Demi-Lee Brennan, 15, from Kiama, New South Wales, became the first transplant patient to switch blood groups – at an estimated odds of six billion to one. Doctors try to use organs from donors of the same blood group; but in 2002 Ms Brennan had such serious liver disease that they took a chance when a mismatched liver became available

at Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney. Ten months later, she developed life-threatening anæmia. Tests showed stem cells from the donor were taking over her bone marrow, the site where blood cells are produced. She was taken off immunosuppressant drugs, allowing the donor cells to overwhelm her own. Within a few months, her blood type had switched completely from O-negative to that of the donor, O-positive.

Four years on, she remained healthy – as did her liver. "It is extremely unusual – in fact we don't know of any other instance in which this happened," said Michael Stormon, a pædiatric herpetologist at Westmead. "In effect she had had a bone marrow transplant. The majority of her immune system had also switched over to that of the donor." He said it appeared that a "sequence of serendipitous events", including a post-transplantation infection, might have given the stem cells from the donor's liver the chance to proliferate. The task was to establish whether the same sort of outcome could be replicated in other transplant patients. *[AFP] New England Journal of Medicine, 24 Jan; (Sydney) D.Telegraph, 25 Jan; D.Mail, 26 Jan 2008.*

THE BOY WHO WEPT BLOOD

The eyes of Calvino Inman shed tears of blood daily. In some reports he was described as "crying", sometimes "uncontrollably", but this was simply poor reporting. Although we are familiar with accounts of saints and mystics weeping blood, Calvino was an ordinary 15-year-old boy from Rockwood, Tennessee.

It was clear from the interviews with the lad that his eyes really did leak blood, sometimes for an hour at a time. "Sometimes, I can feel it coming up, like a tear. I feel my eyes watering. Sometimes, it will burn as it comes out," he said. His friends joked about him being possessed. "I'm used to it now. At first, it kind of hurt my feelings." Despite his bravado, Calvino was anxious; he told one interviewer: "I don't want to pass away, because I kind of love my life."

The first time she saw it, Calvino's alarmed mother, Tammy Mynatt, called 911. She told CNN: "The scariest thing in my life is when he looked at me and said 'Mom, am I gonna die?' That right there broke my heart… They done an MRI, they done a CAT scan, they done it with and without an IV, they've done ultrasounds." As expected, doctors were said to be "baffled", yet one of these allegedly muddled medics – ophthalmologist Dr Rex Hamilton – managed to identify the condition as hæmolacria, which simply means 'tears of blood' and, he admitted, says nothing about its cause. (James Bond's enemy *Le Chiffre* in the 2006 film *Casino Royale* suffered from this rare condition.)

Hæmolacria can be a symptom of bacterial conjunctivitis, a tumour, or possibly Von Willebrand disease (which affects the blood's ability to clot). In females it has also been associated with hormonal changes. In Calvino's case, the investigations failed to reveal any of the more serious possible causes. Calvino's bloody tears could also be related to a treatment he had for persistent nosebleeds. *Sun, 2 Sept; Metro, D.Mail, CBS News, 3 Sept 2009.* **FT255:5**

CHEMICAL WARFARE IN ANCIENT PERSIA

The earliest example of chemical warfare was unearthed at an archæological site on the Euphrates in eastern Syria, where soldiers of an ancient Persian empire gassed a platoon of Roman troops in about AD 256. A makeshift grave of 20 Roman soldiers in full battle armour was discovered at the site of the ancient city of Dura-Europos in the 1930s, but scientists hadn't figured out how they died until 2008. They were defending the city against a Persian siege by digging tunnels to counter those being dug by the Sasanian Persian army under the walls of the city. "It is evident that when mine and counter-mine met, the Romans lost the ensuing struggle," said Simon James, an archæologist at Leicester University. "Careful analysis of the disposition of the corpses shows they had been stacked at the mouth of the counter-mine by the Persians, using their victims to create a wall of bodies and shields. This would have kept the Roman counter-attack at bay while they set fire to the counter-mine, collapsing it, allowing the Persians to resume sapping the walls."

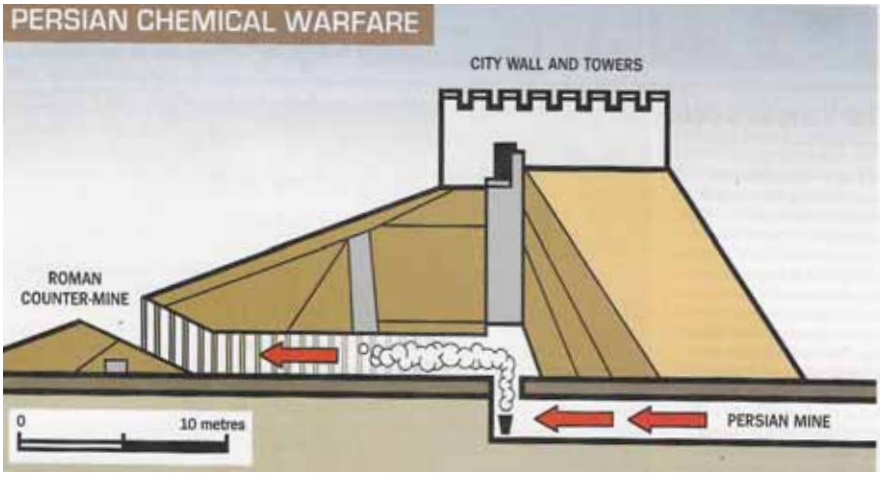
But how did the troops die? It would have been difficult to kill so many well-trained and well-armed men in such a small space unless something more insidious than brute force was used. Bitumen and sulphur crystals were found in the tunnels, which would have been used to get the tunnels burning. But it is also known that these materials give off a highly toxic cocktail of sulphur dioxide and heavy petrochemicals when burnt together. "The Persians would have heard the Romans tunnelling and prepared a nasty surprise for them," said Dr James. "I think the Sasanians placed braziers and bellows in their gallery and when the Romans broke through, added the chemicals and pumped choking clouds into the Roman tunnel. The Roman assault party were unconscious in seconds, dead in minutes. Use of such smoke-generators in siege-mines is actually mentioned in classical texts."

The Persians also built a great siege ramp, which may have been the deciding factor that delivered the city into their hands. Dura-Europos was founded in 300 BC by Macedonian Greeks but its fall to the Sasanians led to its abandonment and loss until its rediscovery by Indian troops digging defensive trenches in the 1920s. *Science Daily, Independent, D.Mail, 15 Jan; BBC News, 19 Jan 2009.* **FT247:18**

POLLIWOGS PELT JAPAN

Reporting an unprecedented wave of tadpole falls in Japan in June 2009, *The Japan Times* called them polliwogs, a venerable word from the Middle English *pollwyggle* ('wiggling head'). The phenomenon was first noticed at 4:30pm on 4 June, when a 55-year-old employee at a community centre in Nanao – in Ishikawa Prefecture on Japan's west coast – heard thuds of something hitting the ground. Walking outside, he found about 100 dead tadpoles on car windshields and on the ground in a civic centre car park, but only within an area of 10 sq metres (108 sq ft).

On 6 June, another 20 to 30 tadpoles were found in Hakusan, also in Ishikawa Prefecture. Another Ishikawa resident found 13 crucian carp on and around his



MATT PATTINSON

TOP: Calvino Inman, the 15-year-old boy from Rockwood, Tennessee, who cried tears of blood. **ABOVE:** Around AD 256 a platoon of Roman troops appears to have been gassed with toxic fumes from bitumen and sulphur.

ABOVE: Tadpoles on a car roof in Kariya City, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, 16 June 2009. **BELOW:** More tadpoles; these fell in Yamaguchi Prefecture on 17 June 2009.

truck, each about 3cm (1.2in) long. On 9 June, tiny dead fish were found in the town of Nakanoto. Shortly after 1pm on 11 June, Mayumi Tsuiki, 38, a Nanao city official, found two dead tadpoles on the roof and door of a car in her home's parking lot. At around 3pm that day, two piles of about 70 dead tadpoles were found on a bridge walkway in Wajima by liquor shop owner Nobutake Takada, 67 – and on the same day about 10 small fish were found in front of a house in Noto.

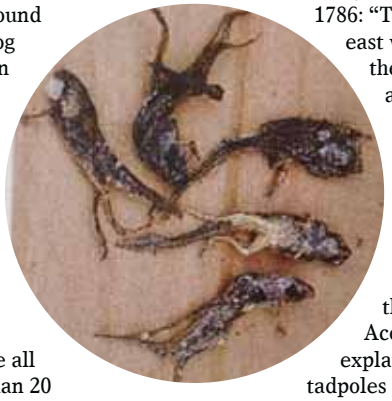
Masafumi Matsui, a professor at Kyoto University's graduate school of human and environmental studies who specialised in amphibians, suggested the falls were some kind of prank, while a researcher at the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology in Chiba Prefecture said: "A crow eats polliwogs, but if they had thrown them up, the polliwogs would have been spread wider on the ground."

Other ornithologists said it was too early to rule out their feathered friends. Kimimasa Tokikuni, head of the Ishikawa branch of the Japanese Society for the Preservation of Birds, told the *Yomiuri Shimbun* that bigger birds, such as herons and black-tailed gulls, might have dropped the tadpoles after being disturbed in mid-flight. But the startled bird theory failed to explain why "flying" tadpoles hadn't been noticed before.

Officials at Kanazawa Local Meteorological Observatory said they didn't know how the tadpoles had arrived as there had been no reports of tornadoes or gusty winds at the times of the tadpole flurries, and there were no nearby rivers, ponds, paddy fields or other suitable habitats.

Matters then got decidedly weirder. In the next few days, the phenomenon spread to central, western, and north-eastern Japan. On the morning of 13 June in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, a teacher found more than 30 dead tadpoles scattered over a 10m (33ft) radius on the sports field at Seien Girls' High School. Then at 6pm a 67-year-old woman said she heard a pitter-patter sound and soon after found about a dozen tiny fishlike creatures lying on a sheet covering crops in the field in Shiwa, Iwate Prefecture (north-east Japan). Some of them were still moving.

At about 8am on 15 June, a 60-year-old woman in Miyoshi, Hiroshima Prefecture (south-west Japan), found 13 dead tadpoles and a frog spread across 20m (66ft) in her garden and a nearby parking lot. At 5pm the same day, Haruko Kikkawa, 74, heard something hitting the ground and, looking outside, saw about 50 tadpoles falling from the sky onto the roof and garden of her house in Taiwa, Miyagi Prefecture. They were all dead. On 16 June, more than 20 dead tadpoles and small fish were found in Saitama Prefecture. At the time of the last report (24 June), no further pollywog rains had been reported. *The Japan Times, 12+13+17+18 June; D.Telegraph, Ananova, 10 June; Guardian, 17 June 2009.*



• Charles Fort noted many frog rains, but he found "not one report… of a fall of tadpoles from the sky." (*The Book of the Damned*, 1919, chapter 7). However, Bob Rickard has unearthed some suggestive data:

1. In *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* (1851), Philip Gosse, visiting Haiti in the West Indies, describes meeting the naturalist Richard Hill, who informed him: "I was told that some frogs I used to hear croaking at night in the boggy ground about Port au Prince, in Haiti, were not known there till a shower of rain brought them to the island. The precise period of this occurrence was mentioned to me, and I have a note of it somewhere. If I could be satisfied that what the historian Moreau de St-Méry likened to 'tetards' (bull-heads) were tadpoles, I should say it was the same shower as the one he commemorates in May 1786." In his *Description de St Domingue* (1796), Moreau de St-Méry had recorded that on 5 May 1786: "There fell, during a strong east wind, in several parts of the City of Port au Prince… a great quantity of black eggs, which hatched the following day… They shed their skins several times [and] resembled tadpoles [*têtards*]."

2. *Fate* magazine (January 1958) tells of the Pueblo Indians of Acorna, New Mexico, whose explanation for the millions of tadpoles found in isolated pools of rainwater in the desert is that they fall with the rain.

3. In 1981, Leonard Burrough, 80, recalled the day in 1910 when he found the High Street in Maidenhead, Berkshire, covered with thousands of tiny frogs *and tadpoles* after a violent thunderstorm (*Maidenhead Advertiser*, 4 Dec 1981). Reference: Bob Rickard & John Michell: *The Rough Guide to Unexplained Phenomena*, 2nd edition, 2007, p.26-27. **FT252:4-5**

For previous instalments of 'Tales from the New Millennium', see **FT438:42-47**, **439:40-45.** For Paul's selection of pre-millenium FT stories, see **FT390:40-45**, **394:46-49**.

PAUL SIEVEKING is a co-founding editor of *Fortean Times* and was for 40 years the magazine's chief news-gatherer.

MEDICAL CURIOSITIES IN OLD CARTES DE VISITE

Taking a break from his regular 'Peculiar Postcards' series, **JAN BONDESON** turns to a now vanished pictorial fad – the once popular photographic calling card known as the Carte de Visite – and discovers a visual record of 19th century medical curiosities and sideshow stars.

The Carte de Visite [CdV], a small photographic image mounted on a card, was patented by the Paris photographer André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri in 1854. The original intent was for it to be used as a visiting card, but the idea soon caught on: people traded cards with their portrait and put them in specially designed albums. Soon, no Paris *salon* or London drawing-room was complete without one of these CdV albums, and this novel photographic fad spread, like a contagion, all over the civilised world. The French CdV photographers realised the potential of Disdéri's invention: why not issue CdVs of royal personages, famous artists and politicians, actors and actresses, churches and monuments, to challenge the collecting instinct of their customers? And would it not be *très chic* to make some cards of scantily clad young ladies, for sale underneath the counter?

In Britain, the CdV had its heyday in the 1860s. Cards were produced depicting celebrities of every description, city views and country beauty spots, and tourist traps like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Notre-Dame in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome, and London Bridge. Those of a literary bent could buy CdVs of Dickens, Thackeray and Thomas Carlyle; those who had religion could buy cards of churches, cathedrals and places of worship of every description; those of a canophile disposition could buy reproductions of Landseer's bow-wows and cards depicting that extraordinary Edinburgh dog, Greyfriars Bobby (**FT297:44-51**).

My own introduction to the world of CdV collecting came in 2001, when I had just moved from London to become a senior lecturer and consultant physician at Cardiff University. On the way to the hospital, on foot, I came across a car boot fair and had a look around. An elderly couple had a stall where, among bric-a-brac of all kinds, I came upon a wooden box containing 110 topographical CdVs that had been collected by the woman's uncle, an eccentric clergyman. I bought the collection, box and all, for £50, and set out to identify the houses and monuments in the cards. Sometimes the clergyman had made a pencil note on the back making a guess as to what it depicted, but not always correctly: "Country House in Co. Durham?" in fact turned out to be Napoleon's tomb in Paris!

LEFT: Two Cartes de Visite showing the French giant Jean-Joseph Brice, who ttavelled in Britain and Ireland under the name of 'Anak of the Anakim'.

As time has gone by, I have eschewed the 'blind chicken' principle in accumulating CdVs and concentrated on views of Edinburgh and cards by the celebrated Caledonian photographer Walter Greenoak Patterson. More pertinently for this article, I have also accumulated a number of CdVs of medical freaks and curiosities. Twenty years ago, these cards could occasionally be had via eBay on reasonably inexpensive terms, but today they very seldom come up for sale, except as 'Buy it Now' options for considerable sums of money, often from American specialist sellers.

ANAK OF THE ANAKIM

The giant Jean-Joseph Brice was born in 1840 in the Vosges village of Ramonchamps, where his parents had a farm. They were both of normal size and ordinary country people. From 1859 until 1862, he was on show in Paris, where he was well received not only by Emperor Napoleon III, who gave him a large gold ring, but also by men of science and the public in general. He then went to London under the name 'Anak of the Anakim', referring to a Biblical giant, doing provincial tours all over Britain and Ireland and earning good money. I have two CdVs of Anak, one bought on eBay, the second one at the North Berwick postcard fair; both were issued by the Birmingham photographer William Hart.

CAPTAIN BATES AND ANNA SWAN

The giant Martin Van Buren Bates was born in 1837. Although 7ft 9in (2.4m) tall, he was fit and active. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, he joined the Confederate army, did well and became a captain. In 1871, he married the giantess Anna Swan, who was even taller than him, and they had a giant-sized house constructed for them. Captain Bates lived on

ABOVE: The American giant Captain Martin Van Buren Bates (left) and his even taller wife, the giantess Anna Swan. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Leicester's Daniel Lambert, who weighed 52 stone (24kg) at the time of his death. **BELOW:** The 1862 Barnum-staged wedding of 'Tom Thumb' and Lavinia Warren and an 1882 CdV of the happy couple in later life.

until 1919, as the tallest person living to reach more than 80 years old.

DANIEL LAMBERT

This human colossus (1770-1809) lived in Leicester for much of his life and weighed in excess of 52 stone (24kg) at the time of his death. For many years he held the record as the heaviest human being (**FT325:28**), but in the recent epidemic of obesity he has been far outclassed. In the 1880s, the photographer George Albert Nichols issued CdVs of a painting showing Lambert being exhibited in London, and of his gravestone in Stamford. Whereas postcards of Daniel Lambert are commonly met with, these CdVs are rare.

In 1862, Tom Thumb married the midget Lavinia Warren in a celebrity event staged by PT Barnum

AMELIA HILL

Here we have a CdV of the American Fat Girl, Amelia Hill, by the celebrated photographer Charles Eisenmann, of the Bowery, New York. Little is known about Amelia's career, except that she was active in the 1860s and 1870s, and that there are no CdVs of her as an adult.

TOM THUMB

The celebrated midget Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838-1883) was 'discovered' by PT Barnum in 1842 and exploited for many years, touring the world for exhibition to the curious. In 1862, Tom Thumb married the midget Lavinia Warren in a celebrity event staged by Barnum. The sale of CdVs exceeded all precedents and I have 11 different ones, some signed on the back by Tom and Lavinia, and by their midget best man and maid of honour as well. Another, scarcer CdV, also reproduced here, shows the sturdy, prematurely aged Tom being exhibited together with Lavinia in Toronto, Canada, in 1881, during his declining years.

ABOVE: The American midgets General Mite, Commodore Foote and Commodore Knott. **BELOW:** The diminutive Lucia Zarate seen in two CdVs dating from her 1880 visit to England, during which she met Queen Victoria in London.

SOME OBSCURE DWARFS

The great success of Tom Thumb opened the door for a number of other minuscule performers, many of them with 'funny' names and bogus military ranks. The midget General Mite (1864-1898), whose real name was Francis Joseph Flynn, was active in the American sideshows for many years. In 1884 he went to England and married the English midget Millie Edwards in a staged wedding. Commodore Foote (1849-1937), whose real name was Charles W Nestel, was another veteran of the American dime museums. There were several Commodore Knotts active in Australia or in the United States, one of whom is depicted here.

Greatest wonder of the Age!
SEÑORITA LUCIA ZARATE,
This young lady is 18 years of age, and weighs only 42 pounds. Is perfect in form and feature.
TOM THUMB IS A GIANT COMPARED WITH HER.
It is difficult to describe in words this wonderful Mexican Pigmy. This human curiosity must be seen and heard, and even then amazement does not cease

They were described as the last of their noble Aztec race, found in the temple of a lost city called Iximaya

LUCIA ZARATE

One of the most curious dwarfs of the Victorian era was Lucia Zarate, born in San Carlos, Mexico, in January 1863. She is reported to have been just 7in (18cm) long at birth and weighed a mere 8oz (227g). Still, she was healthy and vigorous, and of near-normal intelligence. She toured the United States with Barnum and Bailey's sideshow, and went to London in 1880, meeting Queen Victoria before embarking on a long and arduous tour of the provinces. My two CdVs of her both come from her sojourn in London. Lucia then returned to the United States, touring with Barnum and Bailey's Circus for many years. In January 1890, when the circus was travelling across the Sierra Nevada on its way to an engagement in San Francisco, the train stalled in heavy snow and was stuck for a week, poor little Lucia expiring from hypothermia. She represents the earliest known case of microcephalic osteodysplastic primordial dwarfism upon record, and is in the Guiness Book of Records as the lightest recorded adult ever, weighing 4.7lb (2kg) at the age of 17.

THE AZTEC LILLIPUTIANS

Two of the most celebrated sideshow performers of the 1850s and 1860s were Maximo and Bartola, known as the 'Aztec Children' or the 'Aztec Lilliputians'. In the sideshow patter, they were described as the last of their noble Aztec race, having been found in the temple of a lost Mesoamerican city called Iximaya. In reality, they were two poor Salvadoran siblings afflicted with microcephaly, bought from their mother by one of the showmen, who was struck by their odd appearance. This did not prevent their meteoric global success: in New York, they were presented to President Millard Fillmore and in London to Queen Victoria. In 1867, it was arranged for Maximo and Bartola to marry, as a publicity stunt, but Maximo died soon after, according to the Columbia *Daily Phoenix*. This callous exploitation of two extremely vulnerable children is without precedent, even in the annals of the American freak show.

ELI BOWEN, THE LEGLESS WONDER

Eli Bowen was born in Richland County, Ohio, in 1844. He suffered from a condition known as phocomelia, meaning that his legs ended with feet joined to the hips. This did not prevent him from becoming an active and agile fellow, with impressive upper body

ABOVE LEFT & BELOW: The 'Aztec Children', Maximo and Bartola. **ABOVE CENTRE:** Eli Bowen, the 'Legless Wonder', with his wife and one of his four sons. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The conjoined twins Chang and Eng. **BOTTOM:** The Welsh dwarf John Harris, known as 'Dihewid's Little Tailor', with his wife and extensive family.

strength. When he joined the American sideshows as a youngster, he was even able to pull off some acrobatic stunts onstage. He was teamed up with the 'Armless Wonder' Charles Tripps and they rode a tandem bicycle together, Tripp pedalling the machine while Bowen steered it. A veteran of the American dime museums, he died in harness in 1924, from pleurisy brought on by pneumonia, while performing at Coney Island, New York. His CdV photograph, once a common sight in the albums of the American sideshow 'rubes', is rare today.

CHANG AND ENG, THE SIAMESE TWINS

These celebrated conjoined twins (**FT305:76-77**) were born in Siam (Thailand) in 1811. Chang and Eng were brought to America in 1829 for exhibition in the sideshow. After a decade of considerable success, they bought a farm in North Carolina, complete with slaves, married local sisters and had 21 children between them. In middle age, they went back on the road and had more than one CdV made portraying them; my specimen is from London, showing the twins, probably in the 1860s. When Chang and Eng died in 1874, the autopsy showed that their livers were conjoined through the ligament connecting their bodies, something that would have been hazardous had the twins allowed an attempt to separate them.

JOHN HARRIS, DIHEWID'S LITTLE TAILOR

This grumpy-looking proportional dwarf was born in rural West Wales in 1815. He married and had nine children, working as a tailor in the village of Dihewid, Ceredigion. He was known as 'Teiliwr Bach Dihewid' – 'Dihewid's Little Tailor'. He sometimes travelled to markets and fairs with his wife and family, selling photographs of himself (there are at least three different ones). The 76-year-old John Harris is listed in the 1891 Welsh Census, still working as a tailor and living with his 58-year-old charwoman wife, his 30-year-old daughter Mary and his three-year-old grandson David. His obituary in the *Cambrian News* of January 1893 tells us that his wife, described as a large and sturdy woman, and eight of his children survived him.

On the history of CdVs, see LW Culloch, *Card Photographs* (Exton PA 1981), H Gersheim, *A Concise History of Photography* (New York 1986) and OH Mace, *Collector's Guide to Early Photographs* (Radnor PA 1990). On medical freaks in old postcards, see my book *The Lion Boy and other Medical Curiosities* (Amberley Publishing 2018).

JAN BONDESON is a retired medical consultant, author of numerous books on medical curiosities and a regular FT contributor.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

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Joe Rogan, Baphomet and the Smurfs

BRETT TAYLOR tunes in as Katt Taylor schools Joe Rogan in Atlantis, the GOAT and Smurfological esoterica...

Comedian Katt Williams, known for his comedy specials, appeared on *The Joe Rogan Experience* #2111. The episode aired on 29 February 2024, and in one week garnered over 13 million views on YouTube alone.

The 52-year-old comedian, who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, drew on his religious upbringing and his knowledge of "great religious books" to expound on the Garden of Eden. Throughout the interview he touted the importance of literacy ("Reading books moves civilisation") and claimed to have read 3,000 books and to have checked out up to 60 books a week in his pre-Internet youth, reading eight hours a day, 108 pages an hour. Clearly, Katt views his exposure to occult books as the basis of his esoteric understanding; he made numerous claims to learning, such as: "As a preteen, I knew that Atlantis really existed."

"That's the difference between those of us that, uh… want to know the world's great mysteries and conspiracy theorists," he said. "A lie is not something that people are gonna want to repeat for generations and generations… People have reason to believe it to be true. Those are the stories that we talk about, but they're still valid". He cited the writings of the Dogon tribe of Mali, which allegedly describe the stars in accurate detail, doubting that any such tribe would bother to write "a fake star story". Rogan chimed in, suggesting the Dogon described the Sirius star system in these books, then asked, "What if we find out we were aliens?" He

"A lie is not something that people are gonna want to repeat"

then asked if perhaps the Garden of Eden was the place where humans were "created" by aliens. Williams concurred that NASA was covering up the truth about aliens, saying, "The further you get in space, the more obvious shit is." Rogan also appeared to one-up Williams a bit by bringing up Zecharia Sitchin, the theorist who, beginning in the mid-Seventies, placed human origins on "the 12th planet" (see **FT173:39-41, 271:24**). Williams appeared unfamiliar with the late author, a staple of paranormal broadcasting since the Art Bell days.

Elsewhere Williams seemed to agree with Rogan that Bob Lazar was telling the truth about the US Government's UFO retrieval programme: "What I find fascinating is the lack of imagination in any of these stories where imagination could apply… You're seeing somebody tell you a story that is the only explanation for certain things that are happening."

Williams even intimated that his historical learning made him a sort of prophet, claiming that he knew in advance that transgenderism would be normalised, along with the goat deity Baphomet: "I understood that the earliest I had seen that word transgender was Baphomet… And so I knew that in the ritual of Baphomet, the transgender, to show allegiance to him, you had to kiss his ass ring… I knew that both of those things would become popular in the future and that somehow calling people the 'GOAT' [Greatest of All Time] would be normalised." Williams was referring to Éliphas Lévi's conception of the deity as a hermaphroditic goat, which dates back to 1856 (see **FT385:28-35**). Cross-dressing and gender fluidity date back for centuries, of course.

Williams indicated that cross-dressing is an occult "ritual" inspired by Baphomet worship, and described transvestitism as a sure-fire path to success in show business: "Show me one person that ever wore a dress in Hollywood unsuccessfully." (I'll give him one: Johnny Depp in Ed Wood, a 1994 movie that bombed despite being considered one of Tim Burton's best films.)

But perhaps the highlight of the three-hour conversation came when Williams described the influence of alchemy and witchcraft on popular culture by citing the cartoon characters the Smurfs. Clearly Katt's grasp of Smurfology is impressive, as he was citing the 1966 comic strip storyline in which the wizard Gargamel creates the first female Smurf as a means of ensnaring the others (for more Smurf esoterica, see **FT426:32**).

Even Rogan was taken aback by this esoteric knowledge, saying "The Smurfs are based on something?... Whoa!" Unruffled, Williams stayed on point: "I don't want to say what race of people or group of people it is, but in somebody's history, there was this homunculus thing, like a genetically engineered human life form." There was no need to hide the race involved, since it is common knowledge that The Golem is a creature from Jewish folklore, created out of clay (see **FT238:30-37, 244:39, 359:54-55**). The fact that Williams was hesitant to refer to the Jewish people hints at the darker side of conspiracy theory, as if he felt he would be punished for pointing out the supposed connection of Jews and the occult.

It was Williams's comments on Baphomet, though, that drew the most attention, with podcasters, Redditers and YouTubers, and even such religious sites as *Christian Post*, expressing delight and amazement that an entertainer had finally dared to "expose" the "truth" about occult influence in the entertainment industry. The YouTube channel *The Petty Show* posted a segment alleging that many people were connecting Williams's comments to embattled rapper P Diddy, even though Williams mentioned the rapper nowhere on the show. Supposedly Diddy is involved in "dark rituals" involving "voodoo".

Though Williams appeared calm and mellow on the Rogan podcast, helped by the massive amounts of marijuana he and Rogan were smoking, he has been the subject of numerous assault allegations. In 2016 he went on a veritable crime spree in Georgia, and was banned from the Hall and Dawson Counties. Charges including an incident in which he attacked five Atlanta women and stole their cell phones.

The comic has taken some heat in the past for his comments about the transgender community, leading him to work a denial of homophobia into his act. But, invoking a mythical goat demon to explain trans people adds a new occult layer to the story.

BRETT TAYLOR is the author of poetry collection *Old Roads* (2021) and *The Burning Typewriter*, a new study of authors in the movies BearManor Media.

Distant voices, other lives

MERRILY HARPUR shares a personal recollection of her grandmother's mediumistic abilities and her mother's role as assistant in the unusual 'war work' the two women carried out

PHOTOS COURTESY MERRILY HARPUR

LEFT: The author's grandmother (top) and mother in the 1940s.

Mediums very often get a bad rap (sorry), but I would like to turn the tables (sorry) on one popular view of them as either deluded or fraudsters. The fact is that for every dishonest or opportunistic (or simply untalented, over-optimistic) medium, there must be many who keep their heads well down, revealing their gift (for such it is) only in private to family and close friends. One such was my grandmother.

She took her gift most seriously, but occasionally consented to amuse us children by telling us the history of antique items we came across, by means of 'psychometry'. She would hold the item, or if it was small, press it to her forehead, and describe the scene she could see associated with it. "It's just like looking at a television screen," she remarked. Of course we kids tried to catch her out by proffering things from our friends that neither she nor we could know the history of. For instance, the World War II metal soldier's helmet at first gave her qualms – she didn't want to witness scenes of horror – but finally she explained: "This is not a soldier's, but a woman's helmet. She is sitting down next to a young man in hospital and has hung her Home Guard's helmet on a hook on the wall behind his bed." Our neighbour's parents confirmed that this was how they had met, and the scene had been exactly as she described.

On one occasion this talent took an unusual turn. In her teens my mother had bought a pretty glass necklace in a junk shop, and had asked my grandmother about its history. She said she could see it around the neck of a young woman who was surrounded by small children, all of them looking into a pool. Some years later my mother was running a small nursery school, and on one sunny summer's day had taken the children outside to look for tadpoles in the garden pond. As they all gathered around it, Mum realised she was wearing the necklace – and that my grandmother's vision had been of the future.

She would hold the item and describe the scene she could see associated with it

My mother was 21 when the war started, and my grandmother was already an accomplished trance medium. Together they did what they wryly called 'war work', where my grandmother would often 'channel' soldiers who did not realise they had been killed, while Mum's job, as a warm and comforting person, was tactfully to explain to the confused souls about the change in their lives and invite them to seek the light.

There was the odd person, though, who – for whatever reason – did not choose to seek it. My mother writes in her diary:

"After supper, in the lounge, Mummy [her mother of course] goes into trance. A poor fellow begins to talk: he has been involved in a mining disaster and has been wandering about in the dark for 'hundreds of years' he said. The other men with him were killed. He asked me who I was and how could I be talking to him. I evaded a reply, not liking to tell him he was dead. I tried to tell him to ask for help, but he would make no effort to get out of the dark pit alleys, and said he had got used to it and would sleep for another few centuries. He grew quite angry with me for telling him to snap out of it. He said everyone told him that, but he was all right; and then he departed."

The following two accounts are also excerpts from my late mother's diaries. I naturally hesitated to include them as they are very personal. Therefore I do not transcribe her words to 'prove' anything about the afterlife; rather I am guessing she would be content, as I am, simply to interest readers in her perspective and perhaps

provide food for thought. She was a fine writer, so I hope readers will enjoy, also, the moving honesty of her accounts.

Monday, 1 December 1941
This evening Mummy went into a trance. And after a long time she began to whisper, and a voice said "Hello", and then seemed very surprised at being able to speak, and finally started: "You won't know who I am – you won't remember me. I am John Byrne."

Of course, I remember him very well indeed although I had only met him a few times. He remarked that I had grown and later asked which daughter I was. I explained that I was the eldest, and at the age of six took part in one of his operas, Werther, in Paris. He remembered that and added that I was a lovely child. He asked after us all in turn saying, "Time means nothing to me, it amazes me to come back and find you all so changed."

He said a lot about Mummy's singing, saying it had improved a lot and giving me advice to tell her. He said he often attended her singing lessons and did all he could to help her and, indeed, remarked that she often knew he was there.

I told him that she could hear what we were saying, and he seemed puzzled and said, "I don't know how this works. I don't understand it. I have never done this before." Meaning talking through a medium. He seemed very perturbed about the fact that, as he said, he had let all his pupils down. He said he had promised them success and world tours and operas produced by him, and had failed them. It appeared to worry him enormously, also the fact that he had never achieved his ambition as a great singer or teacher. He ended by sending "his respects and love" to Mummy – and departed. I was a little sad, because he sounded rather lost and lonely. He was such a dear, lovable person, musical and kind, but quite vague and impractical, his hair worn rather long, and his physique tall and spare rather like a cowboy; and above all his quite enchanting American drawl, which Mummy's voice affected to a slight degree when he spoke through her."

ABOVE: An Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bomber takes off from Yorkshire on a bombing raid in 1940.

Tuesday, 28 October 1941
I have just had one of the most moving experiences of my life: I was sitting in the warm lounge, soft lamplight, Mummy in a trance in an armchair, the wireless playing soothing popular dance tunes. I felt quite alone. Mummy began to smile in her trance and suddenly I heard her whisper my name "Joyce… Joyce," so gently. I said yes and then her voice replied, "Guess who's here." I answered "'Derek" without hesitation, and he smiled and said "Yes, that's right." It was Derek Dunn. I knew because I was half expecting him and also because he used always to start his phone conversations by saying "Guess who?" He said: "It is lovely to see you again Joyce old girl."

Joyce: Can you see me really?

Derek: Yes.

Joyce: What am I doing?

Derek: You're puffing away at a cigarette. I can smell it

Joyce: Do you smoke over there?

Derek: Don't want to. It was the music that brought me here. It's grand to hear all those silly old tunes.

Joyce: Do you remember the tunes you used to compose?

Derek (smiling again) Yes. We had some marvellous times together, dear. It was grand fun.

I agreed and reminded him of the holiday we went on together, saying it was the best one I had ever had.

Derek: We might have gone on another one like that Joyce dear.

Joyce: We might. Do you remember the songs we sang?

Derek: Yes, sort of duets weren't they?

Joyce: What was it called?

Derek: Something about Maying wasn't it?

We both laughed.

Derek: It is your mother I am speaking through, isn't it?

Joyce: Yes that's right. I wish I could see you.

Derek: Did you know I would come back in this way?

Joyce: Yes, of course. I have been waiting for you.

Derek: Have you? That was sweet of you. (He seemed very touched.)

Earlier on I asked him if he was enjoying himself. He said yes, emphatically, it was marvellous. About his death he said, "I only had a few more to go. I knew I'd never make them. I knew it."

Joyce: Were you frightened?

Derek: No. It was all over very quickly (his face clouded). In the water. We all went together.

Joyce: Are you quite happy now?

Derek: Yes. It was great fun being alive and, well, this is all right too. I don't mind – Mother's fretting though. I was always a bit of a mother's darling, you know.

Then, "I am a bit weak. I will be better when I get settled here. It isn't all beer and skittles."

Then I said that I had only just heard about him. Angela [a mutual friend] brought me the news. Did he remember Angela?

Here Derek seemed to be overcome with emotion and couldn't go on. And soon departed after saying he would come back again some other time.

This was the gist of our conversation and almost exactly those words. Only it was longer, and he said how marvellous to talk to me in this way and seemed surprised that he was able to. It was so Derek somehow, his abrupt speech and a few 'old girls'. I would have given so much to have seen him; his brilliant smile, and his china-blue eyes, and his Air Force uniform, and the 'wings' he was so excited at receiving.'

Note: Derek J Dunn served in the Royal Air Force 51 Sqdn. Took off at 17.45 on 7 December 1940 from Dishforth, Yorkshire, to bomb marshalling yards. Last heard at 20.45 on that day. Aged 20.

MERRILY HARPUR is a painter, illustrator, cartoonist and author who has lectured internationally on Britain's mystery big cats and contributed many articles on this subject (and others) to *Fortean Times* over the years. She is the author of *Mystery Cats*, published by The Squeeze Press (www.woodenbooks.com), RRP £14.95.

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Airborne crockery

Dave Clarke examines an essential and original work which explores why we've been talking about 'flying saucers' since 1947 – when they weren't back then and rarely are today

Saucers

Tracing the Origins of Disc-Shaped UFOs

Chris Aubeck

Independently published 2023
Hb, 421pp, £28, ISBN 9798861290241

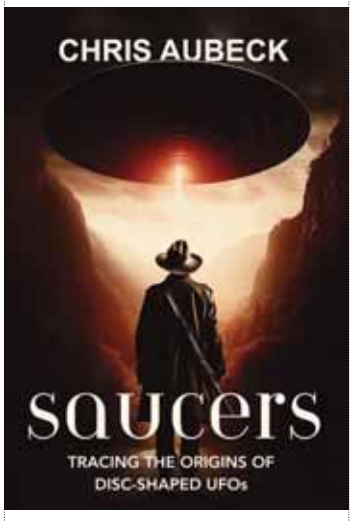
Many readers will never have known a time when the UFO phenomenon did not exist. The complex modern myth that includes government cover-ups, crash retrievals, abductions, crop circles and Men In Black feels as if it has been around forever. But, as Hilary Evans noted on the 50th anniversary of the mystery: "UFOs are a creation of our time, and when their time came, they were born."

The modern UFO myth was created in 1947, on the afternoon of 24 June, when private pilot Kenneth Arnold saw what he later described as "a chain of nine peculiar-looking aircraft" flying towards Mount Rainier in Washington State, USA at incredible speed. UFOs were born as flying saucers. Not because Arnold described what he saw as *saucer-shaped* but how he later said they had moved "like a saucer would if you skipped it across water".

Chris Aubeck's important and clever book sidesteps what Arnold saw. Instead, he examines, in forensic detail, how Arnold described what he saw and how those words were interpreted by journalists and latterly, by influential publishers such as Ray Palmer, the editor of *Amazing Stories*, who kept the mystery alive before ufology existed.

In his original interviews with reporters Bill Bequette and Nolan Skiff from the *East Oregonian* newspaper, Arnold described the objects as crescent or bat-winged in shape. He also used the phrase "flat as a pie pan". He marvelled at the lack of a fuselage or tail and believed they were experimental craft flown in secret by the US Government. Journalists have played a crucial and often unacknowledged role in the birth and evolution of the UFO mystery in their role as gatekeepers and story-tellers. In his version Skiff used "saucer-like" without quotes but when the story hit the newswires, via the Associated Press agency, sub-editors ignored the references to batwing or crescent and adopted the phrase "flying saucer" and "flying disc".

From 26 June, 1947 the craze for seeing saucer-shaped craft in the sky went viral, and for much of the summer sightings and



rumours about them filled newsprint and the airwaves across North America. Until his death in 1984 Arnold remained adamant that he had never described the objects he saw as saucer-shaped. But the fact remains: the *idea* that UFOs (or UAP as they are now defined by the US Congress) *are* saucer- or disc-shaped, has deeply inveigled its way into our culture and individual perceptions.

'Flying saucer' was already in use as a verbal and visual pun before Arnold's experience

But *why* did "saucers" strike such a deep chord? Aubeck's archive research, with Martin Shough, revealed an important clue. "Flying saucer" was already in use informally as a verbal and visual pun before Arnold's experience, in the language of trap shooting. For thousands of sportsmen, newspaper readers and soldiers, his mysterious flying objects conjured up images of the spinning clay targets (also known as clay pigeons) they used for target practice.

Today the saucers remain flying, even though UFOs appear in a myriad of different forms: flying crosses, cigar-ships, triangles and latterly tic-tacs.

In November 2023 I co-organised an experiment during a public lecture on UFOs in art and photography at a literature festival hosted by Sheffield Hallam University. On entry, and before exposure to any visual material, the audience of 80 were presented with a blank sheet of paper and asked to quickly sketch a UFO.

Almost 70 per cent produced drawings of saucer- or disc-shaped craft, some clearly influenced by film and TV depictions of alien spacecraft. Yet the statistics produced by the Pentagon's UAP taskforce, illustrated in Aubeck's book, reveals that just 2 per cent of UAP reports logged by the US military refer to a saucer or disc shape. The most commonly reported UFO shape is a circle or orb, followed in popularity by simple lights in the sky.

So where does this deep-seated idea of saucers originate? The answer is the media's reporting of what Arnold saw. That is why this book is so essential and original in its conception.

Saucers is heavily illustrated with airborne crockery from every conceivable cultural source: prehistoric art, pulp magazines, aviation literature and even jewellery. It is also fun to read and invites readers to interact with its content by testing the author's assertions using Google and online newspaper archives.

A vast amount of diverse material is neatly summarised in a Q&A format for the final chapter where Aubeck reveals his own personal UFO experience and explains why he believes the obsession with disc-shaped UFOs has hindered the quest for answers.

My only criticism, despite a five-star review, is that it is a pity that he does not find space to discuss or even summarise what Kenneth Arnold's UFOs might have been. Popular explanations such as mirages, pelicans and the ETH are not examined or listed so readers have no clear idea why Arnold's experience is so seminal in the UFO creation myth. We learn much about what he calls "the profound influence of language on our perception of the world" but little about how ufologists, in addition to media story-tellers, have influenced that perception. Curious readers, not versed in the arcane byways of ufology, may wish to explore these possibilities, but the lack of a bibliography leaves them without reliable reference sources.

Hopefully the success of this excellent book will encourage the author to address these issues in a second volume.

★★★★★

A walking wonder

Jay Vickers delights in a 16th-century religious automaton

Miracles and Machines

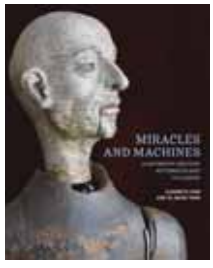
A Sixteenth-Century Automaton and its Legend

Elizabeth King & H David Todd

Getty Publications 2023

Hb, 246pp, £40, ISBN 9781606068397

This is a fascinating and beautifully illustrated book about an astounding little piece of machinery, just 16 inches (41cm) high, from the mid-16th century. It's a wooden monk, which "walks and turns along a non-repeating path, striking his chest with one hand [in a *mea culpa* sign], raising and flourishing a small wooden cross with the other. As he walks, his head and his eyes pivot to gaze at the cross, then the onlookers, then the cross. His mouth opens and closes as in speech. From time to time he brings the cross to his lips and kisses it."



The monk, now housed at the Smithsonian, is still in good working order. Fully wound, his performance lasts for over three minutes; he walks 19 inches (48cm), turns to the right, walks again, seven times over an astonishing total of 14 feet (4m), performing his various motions. He actually runs on wheels, hidden under his robe, but his moving feet give the illusion of him walking.

The book encompasses "art, religion, natural science, medicine, folklore and popular culture" in its examination of the monk. Sculptor Prof Elizabeth King does the historical detective work, while clockmaker and conservator W David Todd takes the monk apart, cleaning and photographing every one of the 133 pieces of iron and wood weighing in total 5lb (2.3kg), and builds a slightly bigger working replica. The book looks in detail at the mechanism that makes the monk work.

Having introduced this amazing automaton, the first section starts with history and myth: the miraculous healing in 1562 of Don Carlos, first son of Philip II, Hapsburg ruler of the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and much more. At 17, "rushing from his room on an ill-fated indiscretion", Don Carlos fell downstairs and fractured his skull. Near to death, he was saved when the corpse of a 15th-century Franciscan lay brother, Diego de Alcalá, was laid on his bed. Philip II pushed for Diego's canonisation for saving his son's life; he was made a saint in 1588. San Diego in California is named after him.

Some clockmakers of the time, used to constructing complex, delicate clockwork time-pieces, applied their skills to making automata as well. Philip II's Spanish engineer Juanelo Turriano is recorded as making an 11-inch (28cm) high lady who danced on a table while playing a drum, and his name is proposed as the probable maker of the monk – who is thought to be a representation of Diego.

There were other automata from the 16th century: another monk or two, and several ladies playing a lute, mandolin, cittern or drum; each of these is looked at in turn, as well as a brief glance at Rudolf II's sadly dispersed *Kunstkammer*, before returning to the question: who made the monk, and why?

★★★★★

Tales and Legends of the Devil

The Many Guises of the Primal Shapeshifter

Claude & Corinne Lecouteux

Inner Traditions 2023

Hb, 228pp, £25, ISBN 9781644116852

Is he all bad? The Devil brought to us by the Lecouteux publishing project is ambivalent, a mixture of coward and villain, monster and (occasionally) aristocrat. He is quite the cosmopolitan in this collection, featuring in stories from Serbia to Denmark, most of them mediated through the fieldwork of 19th-century German scholars, with the occasional voice from Spain and Portugal. There are no French Devils (they didn't, for the original translators, need translating) and little from the 20th century. It has been a long journey from oral delivery to English prose, passing through as many as four languages along the way, and the stories have lost a lot of their individuality in the process: few people other than professional tale-type hunters will want to read them through at one sitting.

But the repetitions are instructive. Storytellers had favourite plotlines – the demon lover, the School of the Black Art, the trick that foils the Devil, the trip to Hell retrieving a magic object – and a bluff peasant code of behaviour. Rudeness is always punished; you should be polite enough to get on with others but shrewd enough to do them down. It is the morality of the underdog, smart, mistrustful, quick to lie or cheat. The best revenge is to cudgel and beat your enemies and the happiest ending is unlimited food and every day spent in the tavern. Kings appear, but mostly as privileged losers who need the advice of a smart country lad to get out of their terrible obligations, and will happily marry off a daughter in exchange.

As for the Devil, he's an ordinary sort of bloke with an old dad who gives him advice and a grandmother who looks after the house while he is absent on diabolical duty. He can be a gateway to social advancement for the servant girl who moves into his big house, or the scholar who goes to his uncanny school, but these moves up out of the peasant milieu are full of danger. Sometimes the Prince of Darkness acts the gentleman – arrogant, wealthy, grasping and given to contracting brief unions with village girls. Whether as cannibal or seducer, this Devil is hungry for human bodies, not souls. He is fierce but not bestial. He is often undignified and easy to burlesque.

These are compensation tales: freed by imagination from the realities of servitude, storytellers loved to inflict indignities on the powerful and pompous. Often the narrative arc begins with a young man being snubbed by an authority figure who in the end is begging forgiveness.

How old are these tales? Their Devil cannot have come into being until the Middle Ages were over, for he is very different from the demons that feature in miracle and sermon stories. The stupid ogre and the cunning dwarf both went into his making. The boundaries between Protestant and Catholic, preaching and holy water, make little difference to this Devil, who is scary rather than evil. The storytellers had nothing against religion, it was just that their everyday peasant world was closer to hand: the kitchen, the ploughland, the alehouse crowd their thoughts so much that spiritual things, even hellfire itself, seem faint and distant in comparison.

Jeremy Harte

★★★

Into The Uncanny

A Real-Life Investigation Into the Paranormal

Danny Robins

BBC Books 2023

Hb, 341pp, £22, ISBN 9781785948091

Danny Robins's *Uncanny* podcast on BBC Sounds has been a phenomenal success. It has now manifested as a TV show and a book. Neither disappoints, but the book is a gripping read. *Into the Uncanny* covers four cases not featured in the podcast or TV show.

Robins's affable character comes through as he interviews seemingly credible, sane witnesses who have had truly strange experiences. A sense of the bizarre and sometimes malevolent seeping

through into the mundane world seems to be a recurring theme.

In 1983 Andrew was a teenager living in Rome. One night he was babysitting the Wilsons' daughters, when he experienced a poltergeist outbreak in the kitchen of the house. Masses of crockery would be transported from the cupboards to the floor without breaking. On her return, the girls' mother asks him if the kitchen has "behaved itself". She too had experienced this. The house is next to a college for youths from the UK who were training to be priests. Later Andrew meets the monsignor from the college, who

takes Andrew to its library where in one room they keep books on the Antichrist. He is the only one with a key and he often finds the books thrown around. The room shares a wall with the Wilsons' kitchen. The old priest confesses he is frightened.

In the village of Averham John Turner is digging in his garden in the 1970s when he unearths a stone floor. He seems to unearth something else as well. In a case that unfolds like an episode of *Sapphire and Steel*, strange events grip the village. Herds of invisible horses gallop through people's houses, hooded axe-wielding figures appear, men in Civil War costume are seen. An archæologist from Newark Museum thinks he "may have disturbed something".

Elsewhere an aunt nobody knew had died comes through on a Ouija board and tells the sitters that she is waiting for her daughter whom she says will die of liver cancer, a condition that nobody knew she had. The woman later died, of liver cancer.

The weirdest case involves Peter, a 16-year-old youth, who is dropped off by a taxi driver in a snowstorm near his Middlesbrough home one night in 1980. Approaching his house he sees, near the gate, what seems to be a huge, leathery egg like a medicine ball. The snow seems not to settle on it and something tells him not to go near it. Then it begins to hatch. A faceless, leathery, spindly, seven-foot insectile "thing" emerges and stalks off on pointed, predatory limbs.

Between the accounts are chapters on why and why not to believe and backgrounds on other cases. Robins interviews the witnesses and travels with them to the sites of the events.

There are no definitive answers here, but much weirdness and wonder. The harder we look, the stranger these cases become. I honestly couldn't put this book down; it is wonderfully strange and well written.

Richard Freeman

★★★★★

Queens of the Wild

Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe – An Investigation

Ronald Hutton

Yale University Press 2023

Pb, 256pp, £10.99, ISBN 9780300273342

Readers of Ronald Hutton's previous books will be unsurprised that he has found little or no evidence of goddesses having survived intact from pre-Christian Britain. Rather, he examines how the

mythology of four particular goddesses has been constructed using the building blocks of folklore, literature, history and pseudo-history. Goddesses seem to evolve like the Earth itself; constantly shifting, incorporating and shedding elements, then re-forming.

The book begins by addressing the question of pagan survivals, then is divided into four sections, each focusing on one goddess.

Mother Earth is first, beginning with references to Earth goddesses in classical mythology, then mediæval fables where God asks nature in female form to bring order to the world. The Romantic poets used her as an allegory for nature and, in modern times, she is a focus of neo-Pagan worship and the spiritual face of environmental activism.

The Fairy Queen originated in tales of the elves that inhabited Britain long before we had the word "fairy". By the late mediæval period fairies were established in English literature, notably in Chaucer and, later, in Shakespeare. Fairy belief may have survived into the 20th century in parts of Britain, before reviving in Pagan and New Age circles.

Hutton focuses primarily on the British Isles, but notes that belief in the Lady of the Night was common across much of Europe. The idea of women, especially poor women, leaving their homes under cover of darkness to fly alongside a female spirit informed later beliefs about witches. The Lady has been identified with Diana, with the biblical Herodias and, in the Middle Ages, became Perchta in Germanic countries. The Lady was good, but subversive; a woman in charge, abroad when virtuous people were asleep, a giver of good things to those in want and a restorer of life to the animals she feasted on.

Finally, there is the Cailleach, a Gaelic character brought to a wider audience by 19th century story collectors. By the 1960s she had become a great goddess, a Neolithic survival marginalised by Christianity and patriarchy. In fact, Hutton argues, the modern concept of the Cailleach is a conflation of many folktales of hags, giantesses and nature spirits.

The epilogue considers the evolution of the Green Man, from foliate heads in church carvings to the consort of goddesses. This started with JG Frazer's *Golden Bough* and can be tracked through the work of Lady Raglan and other folklorists to, again, the modern Pagan movement.

Goddesses may not have survived unchanged from ancient times, but this book demonstrates elegantly how humans craft deities to meet the need for religious focus, inspiration and divine leadership.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★★

The Lost Princess

Women Writers and the History of Classic Fairy Tales

Anne E Duggan

Reaktion Books 2023

Hb, 264pp, £16, ISBN 9781789147698

Once upon a time, Cinderella was worldly wise and wise-cracking. Empowered, not belittled by her sisters, arming herself with a hammer, she rode off to rescue the prince. And the prince falls in love with her shoe! *The Lost Princess* is a delightful, insightful book, which examines and deconstructs alternative versions of our most beloved fairy tales and in doing so, gives the fairytale princess back her bite.

When you think of fairy tales, perhaps the Grimms, Andersen, Perrault or even Disney come to mind. But several centuries before Uncle Walt, trailblazing female French writers such as Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Marie-Jeanne L'Heritier and Charlotte-Rose de la Force were busy challenging the fairy patriarchy. In *The Lost Princess*, we meet these women tale-tellers – the *conteuses* – and explore a fairytale land in which the princesses want to murder the prince, Puss in Boots is a she, and sword-wielding, cross-dressing kickass queens can rule alone.

It is astonishing to reflect that these are not contemporary feminist retellings, but tales that existed in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. These forgotten versions of familiar stories explore gender fluidity and challenge hetero-normative constructs and systemic patriarchy. In one immaculately researched and eye-opening chapter, Duggan shows that swashbuckling heroines were not outliers but part of contemporary cultural and literary trends, imperilled damsels in distress being a 20th-century invention.

These tales remained popular well into the 19th century, frequently being transformed into plays, pantomimes, card games and board games, only

disappearing when our contemporary notion of what is a classic fairytale became "buried under the dominance" of the versions created by the aforementioned male writers.

As Duggan reminds us, the history of gender and sexuality in fairy tales and their adaptations is never one of continual, linear progress. Now more than ever we need these earlier heroines to inspire the next generation of fairy tale readers and help us all live happily – and empowered – ever after. The book ends with a call to arms to restore the texts and tapestries of other lost princesses and allow them to re-emerge from their castle confines, kick off those glass slippers and wield their swords once more!

Olivia Armstrong

★★★★

Unlocking the overlooked

Rob Ixer enjoys often magical and always esoteric articles with neo-gothic woodcuts in a literary cabinet of curiosities

Strange Attractor Journal Five

ed. Mark Pilkington & Jamie Sutcliffe

Strange Attractor Press 2023
Pb, 288pp, £20, ISBN 9781907222528

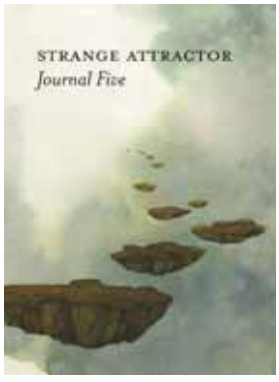
This volume five of a very occasional journal (there has been a pause of a dozen years) combines well-researched articles, often excellently illustrated, pierced between very dark neo-gothic full-page apposite woodcuts.

This collection of often magical and always esoteric offerings offers retrospective vignettes of Victorian to mid-20th century people, happenings and celluloid in a mishmash of folk, popular and high culture and scholarship (some perhaps drifting into obscurantism).

Many articles, always questioning, are straightforward, illuminating persona, places and folk-related animalia. Twentieth-century cinema, and its film stars, real and nascent, flickers in the background and in one long offering in the foreground; sex, religion, political power and the occult are central. Old, half-remembered deities are invoked so that the absence of an august review of the TV series *American Gods* is a surprise.

There are excursions into three possible Magi, all almost unknown in Britain. John Thomas aka Charubel, a Welshman and serial occult magazine publisher and auric tree-hugger, who continues to be a spectral influence on modern astrologers. Gustavo Rol, whose life spanned nearly all of the 20th century, was either a genuine Italian healer or a highly accomplished table-top magician – his card trick was to pass an unopened pack through solid wood. Finally the "Messiah of Hampstead Heath": in 1968 a Hungarian immigrant, Joseph de Haviland, had himself crucified; this and the subsequent criminal trials are discussed in the light of Establishment fears of too much liberalisation. Was it performance art, an S&M act, a money-making stunt, or atonement for the Hungarian Uprising? Was the death of his defence barrister found in a garage hanging from a silken rope a display of the Kray Twins' Peak (sic)? The reader is left to judge all three cases.

The pharmacological reasons behind the association of toads and witchcraft are explored, including a recipe for badgering the amphibian to release a toad-haul of etheogenetic drugs in a seemingly mediæval prefiguration of an ultra-organic meth-lab. Another folkloric article includes reports of deathly shape-shifting animals (and plants), seemingly concentrated in south-west and north-eastern England, but no mention of their appearance in folk ballads ("Tam Lin" would be an obvious example).



A beautiful building in Bremen inspired by drowned Atlantis (still lost in the frozen Arctic Ocean!) and Nordic legends (more nailing onto trees) is fully illustrated in a series of deserved polychrome plates – if ever a building had a colourful (and totally charmed) life from inception during the Weimar Republic to its WWII bombing and later partial reconstruction, it has to be this one. Stunning.

The famous shaft picture from the Lascaux Caves of a wounded bison, an excited man and bird on a stick is redrawn to be given a post-processional shaman orgasmic reinterpretation. It reopens the questions: is the making of art greater than the final artefact? Should art require a degree of discomfort/pain to be powerful? The article suggests, yes and yes.

On a lighter note, Victorian electro-musical and early telephonic experiences are recounted, complete with squabbling musical hall acts with fantastique names, l'Orchestre de Diable feuding with Herr Schalkenbach; more excellent illustrations include billboards, but the best is a cartoon warning of the potential downside of telephone use.

The Sixties film *Performance* is critiqued as a study of duality (there is another nod to the Krays), the Scottish Enlightenment (and fashionably) national guilt… for what other nation ever sold its sovereignty for handfuls of sovereigns? But it is another cinematic offering that is by far the most enjoyable, a shooting script for a (sadly) unmade film that intercuts a sex-triangle between Elvis, James Dean and Nick Adams; Japanese monsters trashing Tokyo; the control centre of an alien space craft and a film set, the dialogue in (intentionally) badly dubbed American English and sub-titled Japanese. A sort of blended Giant vs Godzilla and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and one that only Ed Wood could have made his own.

If there is a theme running through the collection (and the terse, unhelpful introduction baldly states the articles are "hard to pin down … whilst remaining immediately familiar"), it is unlocking the overlooked and repeatedly demonstrating that Wilde's quotation "Everything in the world is about sex – except sex. Sex is about power", if augmented by adding "and magic(k)", remains a valid, if off-centric view, of the world(s).

Approach it as you would an acquaintance's "cabinet of curiosities", open-minded but with a slight smile of apprehension as each door is opened – but once all is seen and read, do return (and try to find the whole).

★★★★

Beyond Fandom

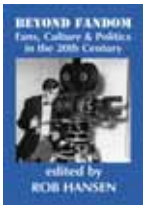
Fans, Culture & Politics in the 20th Century

ed. Rob Hansen

Ansible Editions 2023 (ae.ansible.uk)
Pb, 155pp, £9.50, ISBN 9781916508163

Science fiction fandom is a strange and multi-tentacled creature, and Rob Hansen has been its foremost historian for many years.

There has always been, and unaccountably still is, a snobbish perception that SF fans are spotty-faced teenage loners, to be shunned by decent people who read proper books. It's this perception that Hansen seeks to overturn in *Beyond Fandom*.



Hansen looks at over 30 fans, mainly heavily involved in fanzines – now a common term in everything from pop music to football, but coined in 1940 by an SF fan – who have played a significant part in the "mundane" world outside fandom. US folk singer Dave Van Ronk (whose arrangement of "House of the Rising Sun" was recorded by Dylan and then by the Animals) was a well-known fan in New York from the 1950s onwards; he was also one of those arrested in the riot at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, the start of the gay rights movement. Other fans and pro-writers in the music scene include Michael Moorcock with Hawkwind, of course, but Lenny Kaye, a fan from 1960, was Patti Smith's guitarist and Suzanne Vega's producer, while KISS frontman Gene Simmons, under his earlier name Gene Klein, edited several fanzines in the 1960s.

Rogue magazine, a competitor of *Playboy*, which first published journalist Hunter S Thompson, was founded by SF fans and edited by authors including Harlan Ellison, Algis Budris and Alfred Bester. It wasn't just men's mags; "A number of the founders of the first underground papers in the mid-60s cut their publishing teeth in fandom", writes Hansen.

Finally, London fan Graham Charnock, who co-edited *Oz* magazine and later played with Moorcock in Deep Fix, shared a flat with future author Chris Priest (who sadly died recently) and Felix Dennis – later the publisher of FT.

David V Barrett

★★★★

FORTEAN FICTION: ¡QUÉ HORROR!

MONSTRILIO AUTHOR GERARDO SÁMANO CÓRDOVA ON THE GROWING POPULARITY OF LATIN AMERICAN HORROR

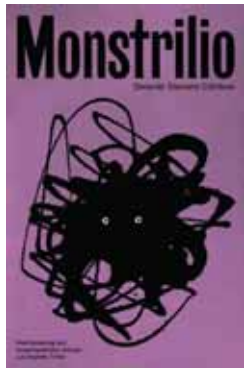
Gerardo Sámano Córdova's new novel *Monstrilio* is a Frankenstein-esque fable about a mother whose attempts to resurrect her son create something new, monstrous and hungry. Do Latin American writers, he asks, have a unique relationship with horror?

When I began writing *Monstrilio*, I didn't set out to write a horror book. Now, working on my second novel, I still don't. Rather horror creeps around me, luring me with its striking images, with its desire to test the limits of what makes us human, with its inherent thrill. Growing up in Mexico and having spent a significant chunk of my adult life in the US (where I currently live), I'm intrigued and delighted by the enthusiasm Latin American horror is gathering among English language readers. I see them celebrating Latin American horror (whether in translation or written originally in English) for its originality, depth and its willingness to break traditions of what horror is (or, more accurately, what horror has been in the tradition of English language literature).

Is there something in being Latin American, or of Latin American descent, that makes us Latin American writers better equipped to engage with horror? Not necessarily. Horror traditions are everywhere, whether we originally intended (or even wanted to) label these narratives as "horror". I do believe, however, that our countries' troubled and often violent histories have shaped our worldview, while a literary tradition of engaging with the beauty of the fantastic and magical has honed our ability to wield the uncanny and horrifying. It's a playful and profound literary tradition that, at least for me, has allowed for experimentation and awe and wonder in my writing. Plus, growing up in a culture that readily welcomes the uncanny as an intrinsic part of existing in the world has been tremendously useful in crafting my stories. We talk of grandma visiting us at night, of grandpa standing by our door watching over us, maybe wanting to have a conversation, of balls of light that dart across rooms, of presences lurking about, some warmhearted, some nefarious.

Horror is a playground readymade with the promise of thrills and chills. It's an invitation to let our guard down and explore our fears, our gruesomeness. One of the things I've found most valuable in horror is how it is, by definition, a medium that demands to engage viscerally first. Horror asks for raw emotion. Reason comes later. Later, if we wish, we can filter and shape and come to understand our feelings of the horror we experienced. We can explore what questions it raises, what issues, what ideas it intends to explore, all while the emotional experience remains in our bodies, in our bowels, in our goosebumped skin. The experience exists, full and alive, whether we come to understand it or not. And isn't that just thrilling?

Horror has many faces, different purposes. There's the horror of cults, of following someone or something blindly, selfishly, consumingly, as it happens in the magnificent *Our Share of Night* (*Nuestra parte de Noche*) by Mariana Enríquez, an epic story of a family immersed in the horrors of a devilish cult during and in the aftermath of Argentina's vicious dictatorship. The supernatural terror of invoking fiendish spirits and getting lost in a gloom-packed parallel world mirrors the terror of the very real disappearances in Argentina, of tortures and murders, of the impossibility of grieving something without closure. Or in the brutal and heartbreaking *The Devil Takes You Home* by Gabino Iglesias, where the savagery of debt and cartels become tangible monsters in the border between Mexico and the US.



There's the horror of a poisoned Earth, a looming terror worsened by the vagueness of its source, its ungraspability, unreachable though ever present, irremediable but hopefully survivable, like in the mesmerising *Fever Dream* (*Distancia de Rescate*) by Samanta Schweblin, where a mother tries hard to keep her daughter safe in a place where a veiled but potent danger lurks.

In Fernanda Melchor's breathtaking *Hurricane Season* (*Temporada de Huracanes*) horror doesn't come from the supernatural, but from walking on the wildest, most gruesome edges of humanity, where people toe the line of monstrosity and don't shy away. Same as in the gorgeously ghastly *Nefando* by Mónica Ojeda. Or the gut-wrenching *Tender Is the Flesh* (*Cadáver exquisito*) by Agustina Bazterrica, where Bazterrica imagines a future in which cannibalism is the way of life, inviting us into the horror of being lulled into becoming monsters. Do we call ourselves such when we can cleanly rationalise our actions? Or what about Bernardo Esquinca's powerful *The Secret Life of Insects*, a keenly affecting collection of short stories that haunts you long after you're done reading, hypnotic in its sharpness, thrilling in its search for lost love? And then there are Amparo Davila's chilling short stories in *The Houseguest*, a collection that explores the uncanny in everyday life, led by wonderfully compelling characters navigating slow-boiling terrors.

I can't honestly say why other Latin American writers gravitate toward horror, but for me horror is the way I'm able to reach my readers' gut; it's how I'm able to question what monsters are and ask if we can live with them. Can monsters, too, be loved? It's how I explore my own fears, my fragility. Horror is an entryway to connection, tenderness, toward understanding how love holds firm despite whatever terrors encircle us.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova is a writer and artist from Mexico City living in Brooklyn. His stories have appeared in *Apartmento Magazine, Catapult, The Common, Passages North, Chicago Quarterly Review* and others. He is Writer in Residence at Fordham University.

Monstrilio will be available from Dead Ink Books on 27 June, priced £10.99.

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The old songs are the best...

This month: an impressive new addition to the Irish Folk Horror canon, the wit and wisdom of William Shatner and a retro-flavoured fictional riff on *Ghostwatch*

All You Need is Death

Dir Paul Duane, Ireland 2024
On general release

Searching for rare traditional songs is an art, but there is money to be made too. Rich collectors will pay for previously unheard variations, but will cough up a lot more for lost songs, so the trade attracts some mercenary characters. A young couple, Anna (Simone Collins) and Aleks (Charlie Maher), travel around bars, houses and towns in Ireland, looking for old folk songs. They'll even stage mock fights in an attempt to draw out more information, with Anna playing the damsel in distress. They hear a garbled account of a folk singer who has unknown songs, but the trail peters out. They attend a seminar of like-minded song hunters, run by Agnes (Catherine Siggins), who, impressed by Anna's singing, provides them with the name of the singer, Rita Concannon, and her hometown, Crossmaglen, but claims she is dead. When Anna and Aleks finally get to Rita's house they find Agnes already there, speaking to the hard drinking Rita, who is very much alive and in a wardrobe. Coming out of the closet, she sings a song for Anna in an unknown language containing elements of Old Irish.

Old songs are handed down, in this case over millennia

Agnes clandestinely records the song, and this seems to unleash powerful malign forces.

Music is key to this film, in which old songs are handed down, in this case over millennia, from mother to daughter. The main song, by Lankum's Ian Lynch and Paul Duane, is really magnificent. The dark forces summoned up are seen as smudges at times, but can forcefully slay their victims: indeed, this is a gory film with some very disturbing scenes, but a lot of the horror is psychological. There are also elements of body horror, introduced as the narrative unfolds, and we see flashbacks to an ancient time when the events in the song took place. It would probably be a spoiler to reveal much more of the plot except to mention Rita's son, Breezeblock (Nigel O'Neill), a puppeteer and children's entertainer who turns out to be as highly-strung as his marionettes as he goes on a murderous rampage across Ireland. Though Olwen Fouéré's role as Rita is little more than a cameo, it is central to the film as she convincingly portrays a wisewoman/keeper of secrets who is plagued (quite literally) by her demons. Simone Collins is impressive, not least in her singing abilities, and her change in character half way through the movie. There are some problems with pacing, but this is a worthy addition to Irish Folk Horror.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★☆

You Can Call Me Bill

Dir Alexandre O Philippe, US 2023
On digital platforms and Blu-ray

Will the real William Shatner please stand up? A man who for many of us has been around for our entire lives, the star of one of the most beloved TV shows of all time, Shatner is a bit of an enigma. Is he an old man living off the fame and fortune generated, mostly, by one role? Is he a driven, multimedia star with seemingly boundless energy, raging against the dying of the light? Or is he just a luvvie, entirely lacking in self-awareness, who doesn't know when to shut up?

In an attempt to answer this question, Alexandre O Philippe has arranged this documentary into nine chapters, each of which is essentially Shatner talking about a different period in his life, with illustrative clips from his many works. And that's it in terms of form. This is very much Shatner in his own words, at length.

The first thing one learns is that Shatner is pretentious to the point of absurdity. It may be the format, or even the director, that allows him to pontificate so much, but he takes full advantage, spouting would-be profound aphorisms at such a rate that I had to watch parts of the film twice to make sure I got them all down. Right off the bat he tells us that "Every living thing in the world is love." Pardon? Shortly after, he talks about how you can feel at one with the natural world through something as simple as riding a horse, if you and the horse are "vibrating" at the same rate. Eh? This kind of thing may go down better in the US, particularly California, but I grew up in inner city Birmingham and my bullshit detector went off in the first minute and never stopped.

The nadir, or perhaps the zenith if you're Californian, comes when Shatner relates a story from a time when he was on his uppers and debating whether to sell a patch of riverside land he owned. He says that he was in the river, naked of course, when he noticed a lizard on a rock, making strange movements with its mouth. He thought about this, and realised that the lizard was trying to catch water droplets. "Of course," he says, "I couldn't sell up after that."

He appears to have a pretty high opinion of himself too. At various points in the film he compares himself to Laurence Olivier and Marlon Brando ("two poles of the acting rainbow"), Robert De Niro, General Patton, and a heart surgeon. He also pats himself on the back for having played a "teeny tiny part in man going to the Moon."

One of the final sections of the film features Shatner's brief journey into space, courtesy of Jeff Bezos. He tells how, when the group left Earth's atmosphere, instead of clowning around in zero-G, he positioned himself by a window and looked out in the vast blackness of space. He saw nothing but death and then, turning back to look at the Earth, he was filled with awe at the beauty and fragility of our planet. In this moment, Shatner describes a series of conflicting emotions in a manner that is very moving; one might even say profound. After that, one can put his earlier pontificating about nature into a context that makes him easier to understand. So, despite all the bluster, Shatner is totally sincere. You may get exasperated with

TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

Over the years, I have become convinced that there's an unwritten set of guidelines concerning how to make documentary series about British oddness. The opening has to announce that the British Isles are ancient, have legends, and are collectively odd. Then, the central protagonist has to announce that they're travelling "the length and breadth" of "our enigmatic island" looking for the legends and the oddness, before introducing themselves as the person doing the above, preferably with suitable gravitas and a portentous voice.

In ***Weird Britain*** (Blaze) this falls to the prolific Andy McGrath, a man able to tell a good story, who informs us that Britain is an ancient isle full of mystery and wonder and that he is going to explore the "fables, folklore unusual phenomena, myth and legends of our domain". All well and good for a portentous opening, but the fact that McGrath looks like the sort of chap who runs an artisan deli and sounds like an eight year old reading lines at a Harvest festival – or has inhaled helium – somewhat undermines the gravitas.

Anyway, onwards and upwards as McGrath tells us he'll be joined by experts (as I've said before, it's never enthusiastic amateurs, is it?) to help him on his quest: well, some of the places he visits might prove dangerous without an accompanying adult, so sound logic there.

He's off to Scotland to investigate that rarely covered mystery, the Loch Ness Monster

In the first episode, it's off to Scotland to investigate that obscure, rarely covered mystery, the Loch Ness Monster. Sitting in the back of a boat a few yards offshore, Andy tells us he's joining the biggest hunt for Nessie in 50 years, with drones, submersibles, pedaloes, you name it. Back on dry land, he speaks with Ken Gerhard, who is immediately identifiable as a proper cryptozoologist as he has a proper cryptozoologist's hat: a well-worn leather Stetson as opposed to McGrath's Peaky Blinders cap. Onto the Loch they go, like a midge-festooned re-enactment of the Dunkirk evacuation, in an earnest attempt to find Nessie (spoiler: they don't find Nessie).

Possibly in an attempt to distance himself from this failure, McGrath puts the entire length of the UK between himself and the Highlands and rocks up in Cornwall, where he sends psychic Simret Cheema-Innis to look at various haunted locations such as Bodmin Gaol, while McGrath himself goes to Mawnan on the trail of the Owlman (remarkably failing to mention Jon Downes's work at any point in the programme) and meets a self-proclaimed mermaid with a powerful ecological message. Then he once again goes for the less-trodden path with the search for King Arthur, including… excuse me, this is my third attempt at typing this… magnet fishing for Excalibur. At Jamaica Inn he admires a case-full of weapons, and on spying an 18th century gun remarks that when in error he says, that he's "made a blunderbuss", but that the one on display is bigger than any of his blunders.

Having watched all three episodes of this, I beg to differ.

the way he expresses himself, but there's little doubt that he really believes in the ideas and opinions he shares. And of course, when you see clips of him looking impossibly young and handsome as the heroic Captain James T Kirk, one can forgive him everything.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

Late Night With the Devil

Dir Cameron Cairnes, Colin Cairnes, US/Aus 2023
On digital platforms

On 31 October 1992, the BBC aired the fictional paranormal investigation programme *Ghostwatch* to outrage from a significant portion of the public left traumatised by what they thought was a genuine broadcast depicting real events. In those days, entries in the found footage genre were scarce and trust in television presenters was still substantial. Thus, when the likes of Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene and Mike Smith appeared on the screen in a show that imitated the format of the popular live broadcast *Crimewatch*, many viewers who had missed the initial disclaimer at the beginning of the broadcast, were confused at best, and terrified at worst.

While *Late Night with the Devil* can't pull off the same trick – its characters are fictional and viewers now accustomed to the genre – it is nonetheless a concept that lends itself well to the world of horror. It's largely convincing stylistically, with its cinematography, set design, and characters fitting in well with a primetime 1970s talk show (it's only let down by a few out of place props and some AI-generated interstitials). The pacing is superbly managed, and the main character – David Dastmalchian's oleaginous Jack Delroy – lends the film a mockumentary feel. As the show unfolds, the sense of dread steadily mounts until the first scary moment catches you off-guard. The effects are impactful without being excessive, nothing is cheapened by lazy jump scares, and the TV medium is used to its full effect. Always slyly winking at the viewer, *Late Night with the Devil* takes an ironic approach to both vintage pop culture in general and the demonic possession genre in particular, but while the film certainly has an undercurrent of humour, it never undersells the scares: the intensity and weirdness increase as the show unfolds and the film achieves a rare balance between its elements of humour and horror. This is helped by the way the performances evoke the discomfort one would associate with watching a broadcast gone wrong from the comfort of one's own home. Dastmalchian steals the show with a pitch-perfect performance as a stereotypical talk show host of yesteryear, making it that much more uncomfortable when the facade begins to crack.

Seeing this with an audience is interesting, but watching it by yourself at home on the small screen may be the most immersive way to experience *Late Night with the Devil* – and it would make a fine double bill with *Ghostwatch* .

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

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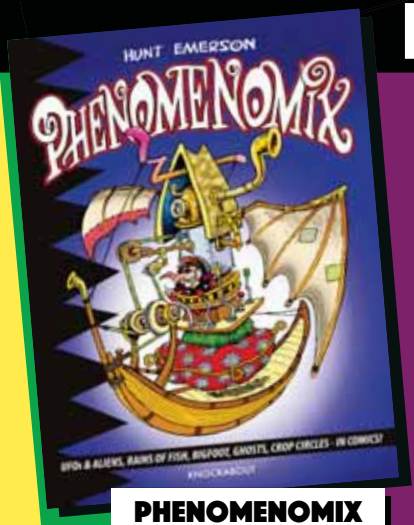

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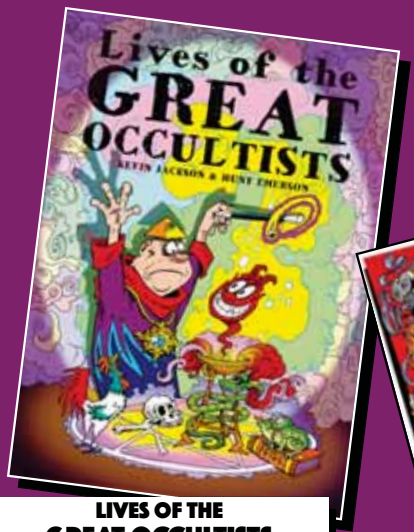

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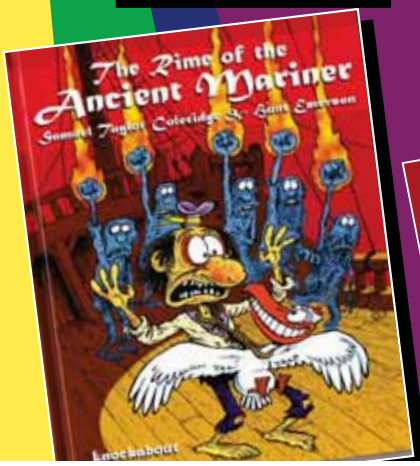

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Moorland mannequin

I think I have got to the bottom of a mystery spook figure that I encountered on a trip to the Peak District in the spring of 2022. My wife and I had booked a holiday cottage near the village of Flash, close to Buxton in Derbyshire, and went out one morning, following the recommendation of a friend, to check out a beauty spot called Three Shires Head. This is situated where the borders of Derbyshire, Cheshire and Shropshire meet and features some picturesque bridges and pools on the River Dane and the area is popular with walkers and other visitors. However, when we visited, the weather was overcast with low cloud and mist obscuring much of the landscape. I had a pair of binoculars, being a keen birdwatcher, and we had good views of golden plover and a short-eared owl – so I was undaunted by the conditions.

Approaching via a footpath from the south, just before reaching TSH the view is dominated by the higher ground of Axe Edge Moor and the steep slope and mass of Cut Thorn Hill. As we rounded a bend, I thought I could make out a seemingly human figure in the distance, standing or perhaps striding across the side of the hill. Although it was hardly visible through the mist, I stopped and checked if it was moving. It appeared not to be. It seemed to me to be rather tall, perhaps larger than a real human figure. I drew my wife's attention to it, but she could not really make it out, even through the binoculars. It appeared to me to be really strange, with spread elbow(s), dressed in grey and perhaps wearing some sort of cowl or hood – and it began to really creep me out.

We tried photographing it with a mobile phone, but the results were poor. Viewing conditions did not improve, so we had to move on, but when I returned home, I drew an impression of what I thought I had seen.

During the summer, we decided to return to check out whether I had imagined the 'Spook of Cut Thorn Hill', as I had now named it. Weather in July was far better and armed with a digital camera this time, we again spied the creepy figure and took some photos from different positions. Zooming in on the pictures, my impression of the Spook was confirmed.

I couldn`t begin to explain what it was and my wife forbade me to clamber up onto the moorland, (which was clearly private and the hill rather steep) to investigate. To be honest, I put it down as some creepy 'art installation' of some kind and we did go into the Tourist Information Centre in Buxton on our way home where a couple of rather bemused young assistants agreed that my photos showed the creepiest thing... and they had no idea what it was either.

Last week my wife came across some pictures on her tablet of strange mannequin-like figures that had apparently been appearing in the Yorkshire Dales and other Moorlands. Although they were different to our 'spook', they are thought to be the work of the grouse moor shooting fraternity – and rather than being scarecrows as such were possibly hen-harrier scarers. I believe our mystery is solved – a clue was there on my pictures. My last photo shows a line of structures that I believe may be 'shooting' or 'grouse butts' that cross the slope of cut thorn hill below the location of the spook.

The website raptorpersecutionuk.org seems to be well aware of this phenomenon. I note some of the shoots say that these are designed/employed to deter predatory gulls and perhaps ravens (really?) from taking grouse chicks, but there seems to be evidence of these indiscriminate scarers appearing where hen harriers have been seen prospecting for nest sites.

Our spook does indeed appear rather *sinister* if, as seems likely, it is associated with modern persecution of one of our rarest breeding birds of prey.

Lee Scudder
By email

Ninnis's sea monster

Reading Belgrave Ninnis's diary of his time as a member of Douglas Mawson's 1911-1913 Australasian Antarctic Expedition (also known as the *Aurora* Expedition, after its ship), I came across this account of a sea monster, on Wednesday 27 September 1911:

"At 12 noon we sail [from Cape Town, for Australia]… About an hour out, we pass the most extraordinary marine monster, the like of which one might go fifty years without seeing. It looked like the sails of a windmill slowly rotating in the water, the arms, as the whell [sic] rotated, protruding above the water line at least 15 feet [4.6m], two arms being visible at the same time, each descending slowly in the same direction (as far as we could make out) and hitting the water in a manner that caused a splash which was visible for several miles. The creature looked, roughly, as sketch. It may have been a thrasher, but no one seems to know what it was with any degree of certainty.' (Belgrave Edward Sutton Ninnis, *Mertz & I ... The Antarctic Diary of Belgrave Edward Sutton Ninnis*, ed. by Allan Mornement and Beau Riffenburgh (Eccles: Erskine Press, 2014, pp. 168-9, reproducing Ninnis's rough sketch; the original diary is held by the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge, p. 11).

By 'thrasher' it seems Ninnis might have meant either a 'thrasher shark' (i.e. thresher shark, *Alopias* spp.; OED gives examples from 1638, 1712, 1860 and 2001), or a 'thrasher whale' (killer whale, *Orcinus orca*; OED examples from 1709, 1782, 1905 and 2007) – although his shipmates, including experienced sailors, seem to have been uncertain as to what they saw. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'thrasher, n.2', July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7690556411)

Rupert Shepherd
Headington, Oxford

LETTERS

Peru versus aliens

I wonder if any other readers noticed the similarities between the reports of alien attacks on members of the indigenous community in Peru [**FT436:4**] and the 1955 Kelly-Hopkinsville case. Apart from the difference in size of the 'aliens' – the Hopkinsville creatures were only about 2ft [60cm], rather than 7ft [2m] in height – other features of the two cases seem to match, for example, the gratuitous night attacks, the aliens' use of some kind of (possibly green) body armour, their ability to float and withstand bullets, together with the 'goblin' references. The 1955 case, bizarre even by ufological standards, still defies a rational explanation.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

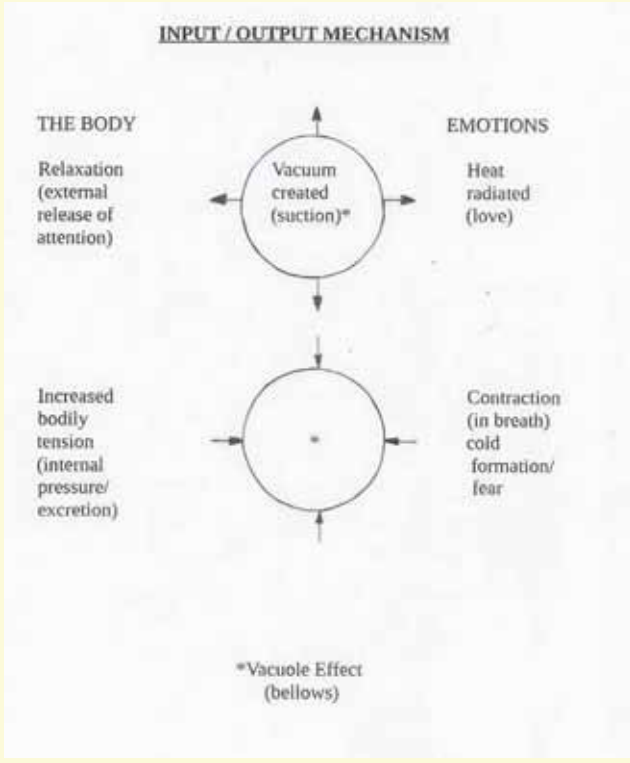
Misperceptions

I think Richard Freeman is being a little harsh on sceptics [**FT433:67**]. I was out walking my dog one morning when I saw a large black panther enter the field we were playing football in. It had sleek black fur, bright yellow eyes, pointy ears and a long black tail. I was scared for my little dog as the ABC was creeping towards her. Before reporting it to you, I decided to stake the field out and get a photo to accompany the tale. So for three freezing mornings I sat in a hedge until I saw it again. It was a dog. I know it was the right one because I talked to the owner who remembered the incident too. The dog was black, had scruffy fur, had no cat-like ears or eyes and had a docked tail, not a long one.

Somehow, despite the claimed eyewitness accounts of relic hominids, there is no actual evidence they exist – except for a few typically blurred photos and one staggeringly unconvincing video. Bears, however, we know a lot about, we have live specimens, dead specimens, fossils, endless photos and video and a good idea of their place in evolution. We know they are real. So why such a paucity of supporting evidence for these relic hominids? They are big old things to have been wandering about all this time without us really having any idea about them.

My point, of course, is that we sometimes cannot believe our eyes. If I can mistake a scruffy dog for a panther, I'm sure someone wandering about in the woods can mistake a bear for some mythical giant ape, especially as bears can, and do, stand on their back legs. Perhaps the pendulum only swung so far towards scepticism because there was nothing pulling it the other way?

Richard Hughes
By email



Levitation

Reading Bob Rickard's account of St Joseph of Copertino's levitation and Joe Nickell's attempt to explain it [**FT443:28-37**], all I can say is Nickell sounds like a bounder, when coming out with the idea that the saint was a circus performer able to jump tall buildings in a single bound, like Superman. I was surprised Nicholls didn't suggest Joseph used air to rise like a balloon. Being an old fart hasn't helped me rise though. I would call people like him intellectual bullies, but intellect is neutral, which is why it discovers things – prejudice is a stance against discovery, so finds nothing but continually stumbles over its own ego.

Nickell resembles The Amazing Randi, and I wasn't surprised to discover that he was a stage magician too. Looking at Randi's dismissal of Uri Geller's spoon-bending, you can't compare his speedy distraction techniques with Geller's slow, calm and open movements (no deception, nothing hidden). Here again you see the attack upon a specific case, in order to dismiss all similar cases. We should be examining the motives of these 'skeptics,' not dismissing the phenomena based upon second-hand accounts (their opinion after the facts). What we have is fear of the unknown (that which cannot be controlled) and fear of the future (that which cannot be predicted): "Is it safe?" Sir Laurence Olivier in *The Marathon Man*.

They'd prefer to believe all phenomena are something certain, undigested cheese from yesterday's meal, rather than their conscience and state of unconsciousness bothering them (Scrooge in a *Christmas Carol* and just as mean with the truth). Preston Dennett's book on levitation makes the same point; practitioners don't seek the limelight, as do publicity hounds, but shun it. They are not attention addicts but humble folk with an ability to do something out of the ordinary. Through dissociation they dissolve the bonds of materialism, in other words ties to the physical world.

Tony Sandy
By email

Hadrian's Wall

Regarding Mat Coward's (as usual excellent – apart from the mysterious introduction of Wales near the end) discussion of the purpose of Hadrian's Wall [**FT443:23**], it should be noted that the one Roman reference to this edifice, in the emperor's biography in the so-called *Augustan History* (ch11 para2) says: "He was the first to construct a wall eighty miles long, in order to separate the Romans from the barbarians (*qui barbarous Romanosque divideret*)" – notice the verb.

The same source describes his successor Antoninus Pius's more northerly turf wall as being constructed "after driving back the barbarians" – again, division is implied.

This debate is perhaps a trifle superfluous. A wall, by definition, is surely a boundary.

By way of light digressive finale, when Richard Nixon visiting in 1972 was asked what he thought of the Great Wall of China (sometimes seen as Hadrian's inspiration), he replied "It's a great wall".

Barry Baldwin
By email

Lunar Experience

On the evening of 30 August 2023 at roughly 8:30pm I experienced a most unusual and unsettling phenomenon. There was a full moon (indeed a supermoon) and it was shifting erratically around the sky akin to a sheet of acetate being moved on a projector. This disturbing and conspicuous movement lasted approximately three hours on and off. My partner, who was standing next to me on our balcony [near Wandsworth Bridge in London], did not notice anything strange or out of the

ordinary. There was light cloud. I filmed the event but the shifting is not visible. I was not under the influence of alcohol or drugs. My eyesight is good and I have no concussions or mental illness and have never seen anything similar. I wonder if anyone has experienced such a phenomenon or could provide an explanation.

Katrina Anne Ward
By email

Celestial events

Jack Milsom [**FT437:67**] reports seeing "stars that seemingly jolt around the night sky before becoming stationary". I'm not an astronomer or a meteorologist, but this sounds very much like a mirage, in which light is refracted anomalously because of a temperature inversion in the lower atmosphere. As for the "huge comet" or space junk flying past, perhaps a bolide would be a better fit with the observations?

Marinus van der Sluijs
Namyangju, South Korea

Same phenomenon?

Nick Smith's letter ("What was shining?" [**FT433:69**] bears a striking resemblance to an account from 1995 entitled "The Hanging Blanket of Dartmoor" [**FT79:56** and FT's *It Happened To Me*, vol 3, p.72]. Norman James describes an encounter in a farmer's field between the hours of 2am and 4am which was "a white, vertical, oblong blanket, phosphorescent, but giving off no light". He describes it as being 10-15ft x 4-5ft in size, and accompanied by what looked like a 'snowfall'. It was witnessed by James and his wife for five minutes, but the object had vanished by the morning.

The phenomenon Nick Smith describes seeing in his garden ("a pale, bright, flat rectangular object about 5ft x 3ft in size") sounds the same as James's encounter, albeit smaller. Both objects were witnessed around the same time of night.

Mike Guariento
By email

Editor's note: For an account of a similar phenomenon, see "Another odd mist" by Mr G Lester, **FT83:53** *and IHTM, vol 3, p.73]*

The Last Starfighter

Regarding the urban legend of Polybius in Chris Wheatley's feature, "Cursed Video Games" [**FT439:34-39**]: although I was too young to have been in an arcade at the exact time frame of Polybius's supposed appearance, I grew up in Portland, Oregon, in the 1970s and 1980s, and spent quite a bit of time playing coin-operated video games. I can think of quite a few local legends and myths that we school kids passed around at the time, but Polybius was not one of them. I think I first became aware of the story in the early 2000s.

I suggest that this urban legend is informed by the movie *The Last Starfighter* released by Universal Pictures in 1984 at the height of the arcade video game craze. Its plot involves a machine that is more than it seems at first, hiding an ulterior purpose: assisting aliens in abducting children for space combat. Alex, the film's protagonist, achieves the highest score, leading to an alien named Centauri whisking him away to help defend his home planet from invaders, Alex having proven his 'starfighting' skills via the video game. Wikipedia et al have plenty of info on it, but the basic concept seems influential in the creation of the Polybius story. Or was it the other way around?

Ryan Healy
Portland, Oregon

Total eclipses

Something not generally appreciated is the unique nature of total solar eclipses on Earth. The geometry is very, very fussy. There is nowhere else in this Solar System or any other that we know of where this can be observed. Of course, you can always park a spaceship behind a planet or moon at the right distance and get one at any time. But to see it from the surface of a planet – probably such planets only number in the hundreds in the Milky Way. To see it from the surface of a habitable planet with life – we may be unique.

[On 8 April 2024] people from around the world with the money and means will be flying into Texas just to see this (there are even songs about this). So why not people from around the galaxy? This is a reason to visit the third rock from the Sun.

Hugh Henry
By email

A hard fall

Just read and absolutely loved Bob Rickard's "The Levitations Of St Joseph of Copertino" [**FT443:28-37**]. Really interesting article with a delicious element of spice. Must have brought Joe Nickell of CSI back down to Earth with a thud. Beef!

Richard Gleed
London

Backstone Circle again

Regarding Andy Owens's letter about Backstone circle [**FT443:63**]. I have been including Backstone Circle in my "Hooded Entities" talk for over 25 years now, including at the *Fortean Times* Unconvention in 2002. It is certainly a place of power, but not one to be messing about with, and speaking with my pagan hat on, I wouldn't recommend doing any type of ritual up there as you would be giving the guardian even more energy.

One guy who camped up there on Midsummer's Eve back in the 1990s was in his tent when he felt as though the whole hillside was shaking. He shot out, thinking it was an earthquake, only to be confronted with a 7-8ft [2.1-2.4m] tall green entity which gave him the mental equivalent of "bugger off!". He was so scared he ran all the way to his car parked in the Cow and Calf car park, abandoning his tent and belongings. He ventured back to collect his stuff next day without incident, but would never go there after that. Many people have also had stuff happen there when attempting rituals.

Steve Jones
Stanley, West Yorkshire

Head banging

Paul Sieveking's trip down memory lane [**FT439:41**] of instances of sight restored by banging one's head knocked a long-forgotten fictional representation out of my memory. As an avid comic reader in the early Fifties, I recall there was a strip featuring a semi-feral youth wearing only a loincloth set in the Wild West era. He and the strip went by the name Long Legs. He looked after a blind man, who if memory serves me was his grandfather. My recollection may be hazy, but at some point this old guy had a fall or such, banged his head and regained his sight. Maybe a reader recalls this athletic teen and his aged companion? It was published around 1952-54. May be *Hotspur*? *Wizard*? Over to the comic buffs.

Paul Screeton
Seaton Carew, Co. Durham

The Hythe Mothman

Regarding the identification of the "Hythe horror" as a crow [**FT439:33**]: I doubt it. Swan, possibly? Swans do, after all, waddle and have webbed feet. They are also, out of water, surprisingly tall. In the dark, at the end of a long neck, its head might not have been visible as it stretched its wings. This doesn't explain the light in the sky, but we may have a "Berwyn 1974" scenario here with two separate elements, a meteor or ball lightning and something else on the ground.

Mind you, I've speculated differently on this case at least twice in the past! It's a hard one to let go. Hang on… it couldn't have been a frogman in a diving suit, could it?

Richard George
St Albans, Hertfordshire

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Gloves returned

Reading Steve Watt's tale of his wife's missing passport [**FT443:66**] reminded me of a similar experience. In 2016 I was made aware that my local woods (Adel Woods in north Leeds) contained an ancient rock carving of some significance, thought to be over 2,000 years old. I was astonished to think that the woods where I had walked for over 40 years contained a secret such as this, and with the help of location coordinates, I set out one November Saturday in 2016 to track the carving down.

I had set out in the middle of the afternoon, but by the time I was in the area it was getting towards 4pm and the Sun was beginning to set. After almost giving up for the day, having scrutinised every likely rock I could find, I suddenly saw the carving. It's small and very close to the base of a rock, quite faded but still distinctive, and looking like an ancient warrior with a shield and a spear.

According to historicengland.org.uk: "The carving depicts a schematic image of a human figure in a style typical of the Brigantes tribal region. The carving is difficult to date, but the depiction of a circular shield is characteristic of early Roman images. The figure has been identified as a Celtic warrior god Cocidius, a deity which features regularly in Romano-British society." (https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1019636?section=official-list-entry)

In the fading light I hastily took some pictures. To do this I needed to take my gloves off and put them in my coat pocket. Once the photos were taken, I reached back into the coat to put my phone away and retrieve my gloves, only to discover they had disappeared. A thorough search of my coat pockets and surroundings produced nothing. The gloves had simply vanished.

At this point it's probably worth mentioning that the location of the carving is something of a hotspot for local folklore.

"After almost giving up for the day, I suddenly saw the carving"

Around 100 metres from the carving, and connected by a rough woodland path, there's a large rock known to all locals as 'Devils' Rock'. Many tales of witchcraft taking place in the area have circulated over the years, and – even allowing for a generous dose of schoolboy urban folklore – it is certainly a place that can have an unsettling atmosphere.

As for the vanishing gloves, some more detailed searches still failed to find them. It was at this point that I got a strange feeling that something or someone was playing tricks on me. As I stared at the rock carving, it seemed to take on a strange kind of life. It wasn't anything overly perceptible, and I'm certainly not talking about the carving beginning to move, but something in my brain plugged into a feeling that the carving had somehow awoken and was craving some mischievous attention.

The woods were completely deserted so I didn't feel too foolish when I decided that my only course of action was to try and speak to the carving. I stared straight at it and simply said "I think you have taken my gloves. Please could I have them back?".

At this point I decided that I would walk the hundred metres or so along the path towards Devil's Rock to give the carving some time to think. Yes, ridiculous as it sounds, everything appeared to be perfectly logical while I was doing this. Having walked there and then retraced my steps, I approached the rock carving for the final time.

There, in front of the carving, perfectly placed one on top of the other, were my gloves. I picked them up, thanked the carving for giving them back to me and decided it was probably time to leave.

I've visited the rock many times since and have never had a whiff of any other paranormal activity. Perhaps on that day the ancient carving was tired of being overlooked by ramblers and dog walkers and just wanted a bit of attention?

James Fisher
Leeds, West Yorkshire

Passport Pixies

As a regular FT reader I had read about 'Pixilation' previously in the magazine, and had successfully used the technique myself, for instance when I lost a valuable bike light.

Last Wednesday [13 Mar 2024], when preparing for a short trip abroad, I noticed that our daughter's passport was missing from the family travel bag. I asked my wife about this and she told me that she had taken it so she could apply for a new bank account for my daughter. We are normally very diligent about keeping the passports in the proper place. My wife was annoyed with herself and "turned the house upside down" looking for the passport whilst I was away looking down the back of sofas, going through the recycling bin etc. We resolved that I would look further once back at home, and if unsuccessful we would apply for a new passport via the FastTrack service. A family ski holiday was in jeopardy.

I returned last night [17 March] and at lunchtime today I coached my wife in asking the Pixies for the location of the passport. I told her to ask them in her head and not speak out aloud. She thought this was nonsense but humoured me anyway, ready to do anything to find the passport, thinking "I must be going mad". After lunch I returned to work in my home office. Around half an hour later my flabbergasted wife burst in, passport in hand. It had been on top of a chest of drawers "hidden in plain sight" so to speak. She could not understand how she had missed it.

Later in the afternoon I returned to the house to make coffee and opened my mail including the latest copy of *Fortean Times*. I flicked straight to 'It happened to me' section, where the first item was Steve Watt's story about recovering his wife's passport by asking the Pixies (although he asked them out loud) [**FT443:66**].

My hypothesis is that the information regarding the location of a lost object might be

available to the unconscious mind, but has been supressed by more conscious thinking systems. In the process of looking for the object we build a view of where the object might be ("I wouldn't have put it there" etc), which creates a mental blind spot. The Pixie notion serves to break the frame we have put on the situation allowing the object to be noticed. Or perhaps there really are Pixies.

Stephen Cresswell
Walton on Thames, Surrey

Pint glass mystery

This happened around March 2023, while my partner and I were taking a short break in Caldicot, South Wales. We arranged to meet a friend at a local pub to watch a mid-week football game. The pub was fairly busy for that time of week and most of the punters were sitting quietly watching the match. We sat at a table opposite a big screen to get a good view of the action.

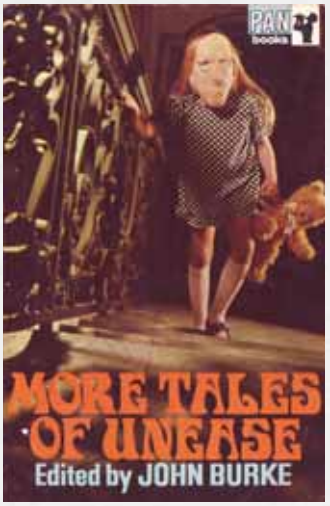
The table in front of us was empty, apart from a pint glass about three quarters full of beer and an empty coffee cup. Suddenly the pint glass flipped over, spilling its contents over the table and onto the floor. There was still no one at the table and there seemed to be no reason for this to happen. The table was level and stable and the pint glass was on a solid part of the table, not on the edge or in a place where it could fall over. It was very strange.

Most of the people in the bar also saw this happen and were as baffled as we were; a few people said that they felt some kind of presence go past them just before the glass fell over. I was tempted to ask the bar staff if they had any CCTV of that part of the pub so that we could watch the incident on film, but I decided not to ask out of fear of looking foolish. The incident still mystifies me.

Ian Squibbs
Reading, Berkshire

Strange reappearance

I spent three years working at the Cambridge Department of Experimental Psychology in the 1980s and am familiar with aspects of memory, cognition



"I often check to make sure that the book has not vanished again!"

and perception. I spent most of my life in scientific research and had a strange experience on 22-23 December 2022, which continues to puzzle me.

I had decided to re-read one of the first books I ever purchased, a five-shilling 1969 Pan paperback shelved at the same location in my library for decades. I put it aside on 22 December at 1.30am and went to bed. The next morning it had disappeared. I looked everywhere around the room and of course checked the place where it was usually shelved, but there was no sign of it. Feeling in my sleepy state I must have left it in the bathroom or kitchen or elsewhere in the house, I proceeded to search with no luck, becoming increasingly perplexed.

I had heard of the vanishing object phenomenon and wondered if it had been removed by some paranormal means and might reappear in some unlikely place in the future, so I looked in places where I would never normally have put it, like the fridge or the washing machine, so I could reasonably say that it had not been there before if it did later turn up there. I also checked several times in its usual place on the shelf in case it had re-appeared there and remember very carefully telling myself I had done so and it was not there. I was almost ready to believe anything by now and went to bed.

The next day [Friday, 23 December], when I had a spare moment, I resumed the search. I discovered that the book was unavailable on my usual book search website, and so concluded it had been stolen to order by the fairies. Having given up, I decided in the late afternoon to read instead *The Fourth Ghost Book* edited by James Turner, which I had bought on the same day in 1969 as the missing book, also for five shillings from WH Smiths in Oxford when I was a young teen. It had always been shelved alongside the missing book and, when I reached for Turner's book, I found my missing book sitting happily next to it.

I could only assume that it had been there all along and that I had simply failed to see it over and over and over again. It seemed that only when I had really given up looking for it could it be found. This was no senior moment of misperception and not a magic trick of distraction by sleight of hand. This happened continually to me over one and a half days. I have never experienced such a thing before and normally associate such failings of perception with brain damage where people are unable to recognise objects placed in front of them.

I could only conclude that the part of the brain which is activated in search mode and another part that recognises the object you are searching for have in some way been semi-permanently disconnected. Perhaps it is more reassuring to believe that the object has vanished by paranormal means than to realise that you are having an uncomfortable preview of what dementia feels like.

The title of my missing book was *More Tales of Unease,* edited by John Burke. The experience left me feeling distinctly uneasy and I often check to make sure that the book has not vanished again!

Nigel Swietalski
By email

Vision at school

When I was about eleven years old (I am now 70) in maths class at school, I looked up from my paper, but instead of seeing the wall in front of me I had a vision of my aunt and uncle from Glasgow approaching the family home. My mum was up a ladder washing windows at the time; then she turned her head and when she saw our relatives approaching, she descended to greet them. That was when my vision disappeared, and the classroom wall returned. I looked at my watch to note the time as half past two. Unfortunately, the teacher saw me looking into space instead of the maths questions and belted me.

After school, I rushed home to find my mum entertaining my aunt and uncle. When they left, I asked my mum when they had arrived. She said it would have been about half past two. I said she was up a ladder washing windows when they came. She asked me how I knew, and the colour drained from her face when I told her I saw the whole thing in a vision while in the classroom.

I found all this strange and puzzling. Why is anyone given a vision in real time when there is nothing that they can do about it?

On another matter, sleep paralysis seems to be a common occurrence that I have experienced myself. A number of times when I was a boy, I have had to close my eyes tightly and will myself back into the land of the fully awake. This method worked every time. I found this also works if you are aware you are having a nightmare and wish to get out of it.

Alex Hamilton
Larkhall, South Lanarkshire

Erics and Grahams

I read Jenny Randles's article on synchronicity [**FT341:26-27**] with great interest, which reminded me of a couple of instances I have experienced, both involving dates and names. I was born on 21 January 1950, the day that a favourite author of mine, George Orwell, died. But the coincidence goes further than the date. Orwell's real name was Eric Blair, resulting in one Eric leaving this world and another Eric entering it.

The second instance relates to another favourite of mine, the jazz/blues/rock musician Graham Bond, who died under the wheels of a tube train on 8 May 1974. In 2013 my best friend died of cancer on the same date, 8 May. My friend's name: Graham. Both these coincidences were meaningful only to me.

Eric Fitch
Hereford

SIMULACRA CORNER

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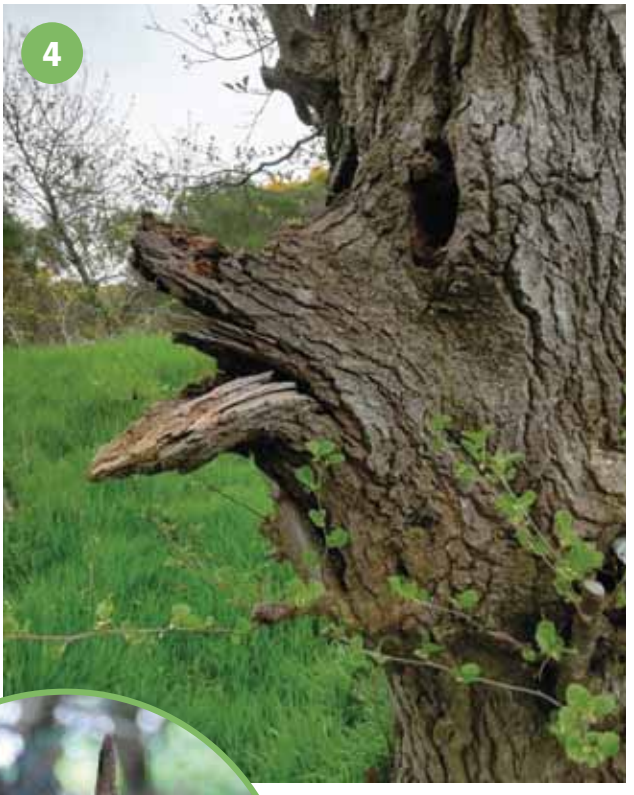

1. Dave Saunders noticed this "Guardian of the Severn" on Alney Island, Gloucester.

2. Barbara Coleman sent us this tree frog, located in the cemetery in Bedworth, Warwickshire.

3. Clare Crawford spotted this 'deer' near Escrick outside York.

4. Tony Sandy sent us this tree face, which he calls "Captain Beaky".

5. Jon Ryder photographed this tree stump at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire in 2012. He thought it looked like "a horned devil vomiting".

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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Fortean Traveller

141. Beyond Black Shuck

TOM HIBBERT ditches the dog and delves into Blythburgh's other weirdness

PHOTOS: TOM HIBBERT

ABOVE: Holy Trinity, Blythburgh. **BELOW:** One of the church's roof angels: is that a slightly disapproviing look?

A monstrous black hound with eyes like the very fires of hell themselves, whose awful gaze freezes the parishioners to the spot – else strikes them dead – as it bursts from the church to the mist-veiled marshes beyond…

The giant hell-hound Black Shuck is something of a folkloric celebrity in coastal East Anglia, featuring in countless books and articles, including numerous appearances in *Fortean Times*.[1] No location is more closely connected with Black Shuck than the Suffolk village of Blythburgh and, in particular, its church. However, during a trip there with my wife (*FT* contributor Lisa Gledhill), the church revealed plenty more strangeness waiting to be discovered.

Quite when the settlement we now call Blythburgh began is itself something of a mystery. The first written records are from Saxon times but, in a Time Team episode centred on Blythburgh,[2] landscape archæologist Stewart Ainsworth opines that the earthworks in the area suggest it had a considerable presence in prehistory. By the Middle Saxon period (at the latest) Blythburgh was evidently a place of some importance; in 654 when King Anna and his son Jurmin were slain in battle by Penda, the 'last pagan king', their bodies were buried at Blythburgh: it was clearly thought to be a fit resting place for royalty.

The visitor is observed by a squadron of wooden angels

The church, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, is a beautiful flint and stone product of the Middle Ages, far too large for the present-day village. It is sited on the last piece of dry land before the ground drops away to the reed-fringed river Blyth (once the haunt of smugglers) and it is inside the church that the strangeness starts to become apparent. The visitor is observed – not with complete approval, you sense – by a squadron of 15th century carved wooden angels, so characteristic of this part of the country. Engraved into the stonework of the church are a number of mysterious marks; some may be masons' marks, one is likely a mass dial, but others are surely apotropaic symbols, carved into the fabric of the church for the purpose of magically warding off evil. To accompany them, there are also apotropaic burn marks, made by tapers or candles, in the north door of the church; the north side of the church traditionally being considered most susceptible to attack by the forces of darkness. Naturally, these marks are now said to have been made by the claws of Black Shuck as he burst from the church before disappearing into the Suffolk night.

These protective acts don't seem to have ensured religious correctness in Blythburgh; the church possesses a rare copy of the infamous 1613 'Judas Bible', so called because one of the Gospel verses [3] is attributed to Judas rather than Jesus – a rather significant change. The Bible is on display within a glass case and, intriguingly, one of its pages has been torn out. I have yet to find an explanation for this ecclesiastical vandalism.

The late Middle Ages presents a different mystery, literally built into the walls of the church. In the outside wall of the eastern end of the church, immediately behind the high altar, are a series of letters formed from blocks of lustrous black flint and pale

PHOTOS: TOM HIBBERT

ABOVE LEFT: The cryptic letters on the church's eastern end. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The 'Judas Bible' with a torn-out page. **BELOW:** A mysterious carving in the church; could it be an apotropaic symbol? **BOTTOM:** A faceless figure on a mediæval pew end.

stone. These spell out: A, N, J/S, B, S, T, M, S, A, H, K, R, all in an obscure Lombardic script popular in the late 15th century.[4] Several explanations have been proffered, the most widely accepted being that it commemorates the major rebuilding of the church in the 1480s, and the initials stand for *Ad Nomina Jesu Beati Sancti Trinitatis, Maria (et in) Sanctorum Annae (et) Katherinae Reconstructus.*[5]

The offended look of the roof angels may be a response to the tumult of the English Civil War. Though no battle is recorded near Blythburgh, the area was deeply affected by the war and religious zeal may well be responsible for the defacing of several of the carved mediæval pew ends. It is recorded that William "Smasher" Dowsing,[6] a local Puritan, ordered the removal of superstitious pictures and images from Blythburgh church in 1644. The resulting faceless figures now give a haunting, Jamesian feel to the church's interior – appropriately so, as many of MR James's peerless ghost stories are set on this stretch of the Suffolk cost. Further evidence of Civil War troubles can be seen on the handsome register of perpetual curates of the church; this lists all curates from 1310 to the present day and the entry for 1652 is named "Nathaniel Flowerdew – Intruder". Evidently not a popular chap.

Fast-forward to the 20th century and Blythburgh's weirdness takes a rather surprising turn. During World War II there were many bomber

bases, both RAF and USAAF, in East Anglia. From some of these airfields were launched the 'flying bombs' of the secret 'Operation Aphrodite'. This involved American B17 and B24 bombers being heavily modified to be crammed full of high explosives and converted to simple radio-control. These were intended to be used as colossal flying bombs meant to destroy key targets in Nazi-occupied Europe. They operated by having a two-man crew (pilot and engineer) perform the take off and reach cruising altitude, before the men primed the explosives and bailed out, parachuting back to earth; a smaller escort aircraft then 'steered' the flying bombs towards their target via radio control. One of the US pilots taking part in this secret operation was Joseph P Kennedy Jr., eldest brother of future US President John F Kennedy. Joseph Kennedy was killed on 12 August 1944 (along with engineer Lt. Wilford John), when the aircraft he was piloting exploded around a mile south of Blythburgh, shortly after the explosives were primed. The resulting explosion was said to be the largest that ever occurred over the British Isles. There is a memorial to the airmen in the church. Operation Aphrodite was largely ineffective and quietly abandoned before the end of the war. This is one of the few times that (to the best of my knowledge) that a strange death in the Kennedy family has not spawned conspiracy theories.

So, surely this has brought us up to date with weirdness of Blythburgh? That certainly seemed the case as we headed out of the churchyard, having first visited the tiny, but obviously still in-use, chapel above the porch – a real throwback to the mediæval era – but there was one more surprise awaiting us. On the grass in the graveyard were a couple of large bones. I've no idea if they were human, but they were the right size and were clearly of some age. I'm sure there's some perfectly rational explanation for this, but the thought that they were dropped by a certain diabolic dog, or one of his descendants, is proving hard to shake.

NOTES

1 Most recently in **FT412:58-59, 424:14-17, 429:66-68**.

2 *Time Team* Series 16, Episode 13, "The skeletons in the shed", first broadcast 29 Mar 2009.

3 Matthew, chapter 26: verse 36.

4 Sir WR Gowers, "The flint-work inscription on Blythburgh church" in *Proceedings of the Suffolk Antiquarian Society*, 1902.

5 "In the blessed name of Jesus, the Holy Trinity and Mary, and in honour of Saints Anne and Katherine, this was rebuilt."

6 J Morrill, "Dowsing, William (bap. 1596, d. 1668), iconoclast", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP 2004).

TOM HIBBERT is a scientist who does secret things for the government. He has a longstanding interest in forteana and a collection of felt hats.

PHENOMENOMIX

Mme ASTRALOOZI – PSYCHIC FIGHT

HUNT EMERSON

THERE'S A WOMAN AT THE DOOR WANTS TO SEE YOU...
WHAT? LINA de WHAT?
Mme. Lina de Ferkel
MEDIUM
* Psychic Possession
* Chats with Spirits
* Musical Hypnotic Visitations a Speciality
Available for Clubs, Parties, Picnics, Cult Meetings, Masonic Dinners
MEDIUM??!!
WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?!? DOES SHE THINK SHE CAN OUT-PSYCHIC ME?!
MAYBE SHE JUST WANTS AN AUTOGRAPH AND A CUP OF TEA, MRS. A...
PAH! VERY WELL- SHOW HER IN!
Mme de FERKEL! SUCH AN UNEXPECTED HONOUR!
Mme ASTRALOOZI! I CAN SENSE YOUR AURA OF PSYCHICNESS FROM HERE! SNIFF
AHA – DEAR LADY! I AM KEEPING MY POWERS AT LOW VOLUME! I DID NOT WISH TO OVERWHELM YOU!
TRUST ME, MADAME! I HAVE POWER ENOUGH TO OUT-PSYCH YOU, AND MORE! JUST YOU WAIT TIL YOU SEE MY MUSICAL HYPNOTIC VISITATIONS!
YOU WANNA FIGHT?
OK BITCH! FEEL THE POWER OF MY MENTAL CURSE! NNNGHHGHNGG!
THAT'S NOTHIN', GIRL! MY HYPNOTIC MUSICAL TRANCE TRUMPS YOUR MENTAL CURSE! GNNGHNNGGHHNNNGH!!
♫ LET'S TWIST AGAIN ♫
GNNGHNNGGHN!!!
MEANWHILE...
NNGHHGNN
hiccup!

PARDON! heehee!
BURP!
BURP!
AAGH!! ALL MY MAGNETISM AND HYPNOTIC STUFF IS NO MATCH FOR THIS!
I GIVE IN! I'M GOING TO TAKE MY CLOTHES OFF FOR M. ALPHONSE MUCHA!
HE'S A TOFF!
HAH! THAT SHOWED HER, eh VERA?! THAT WHUPPED HER ASS! WHO'S THE MEDIUM WITH THE MOST, eh? Mme ASTRALOOZI! HEY!!
YES, MRS. A.... hiccup!

COMING NEXT MONTH

SHUKER'S MOVIE MONSTERS

A CRYPTOZOOLOGIST AT THE CINEMA

A HAUNTING IN VENICE

A FORTEAN TOUR OF THE FLOATING CITY

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FORTEAN TIMES 446
ON SALE 13 JUNE 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

After Jose G Riviera, 47, was gunned down in broad daylight in the city centre of Camden, New Jersey, police tracked down his killer using the number plate of a car seen fleeing the scene. It led them to Jose O Riviera, 36, who was already in custody on a different charge. The two Jose Rivieras are not related and, as yet, the police have not been able to find a motive for the killing. *nj.com, 24 Oct 2023*.

During a severe ice storm in Portland, Oregon, a live power line brought down by a falling branch landed on an SUV just as the couple who owned it were trying to get in with their baby. Tajaliayh Briggs, 21, who was pregnant, screamed to her boyfriend DeVonte Nash to get the baby to safety and so he grabbed the child and attempted to scramble up the icy driveway. However, he fell and slid back, his foot touching a live wire. "A little fire, then smoke," said neighbour Majiah Washington, 18, who had been alerted to the drama by the flash of the cable hitting the car. Briggs herself then attempted to grab the child, but also slipped, touched the wire, and was electrocuted. Seeing what was happening, Briggs's brother, Ta'Ron Briggs, 15, rushed out of the house to try and reach the baby as well, but he, too was shocked and died. Washington, calling emergency services while watching this happen, assumed everyone was dead, but then saw the child, lying on top of his father's body, move his head and realised he was alive. Despite just having seen three people die, she decided to try and save the child herself. Crouching low to avoid the swinging cable, Washington managed to keep her footing on the ice and grab the baby, pulling him to safety. In the process she touched Nash's body but did not receive a shock. Portland Fire and Rescue took the child to hospital, where he was found to be unharmed. Spokesman Rick Graves, praising Washington's heroism, admitted that they did not understand how she and the baby had avoided electrocution. *theguardian.com, 19 Jan; oregonlive.com, 25 Jan 2024.*

Police in the Banbung district of Chonburi province, Thailand, were called to a Buddhist temple after reports of a man going on the rampage and smashing statues. The 49-year-old man, named only as Ek, had been taking methamphetamine with Best, a monk at the temple with whom he had been staying. However, after smoking the drug, Ek went into a violent frenzy and attacked Best with a fluorescent tube, causing him to flee to call for help. Ek then started smashing the temple statues and by the time the police arrived had barricaded himself into the main hall, locking all the doors and windows. Believing him to be armed, the police stayed outside and tried to talk Ek into surrendering, but got no response, so broke down the door. Entering the hall, officers found Ek dead, impaled on a statue of the Buddha. Investigators concluded that he had tried to scramble up the largest statue in the hall to attack it but had slipped and fallen onto a smaller statue below, ending up impaled on its pointed headgear. This had pierced Ek's heart and lungs, killing him instantly. As a result of the incident, Best reportedly concluded that his behaviour made him unfit for the monastic life and left the temple. *asiaone.com, 14 Mar 2024*.

In August last year, an apartment building fire claimed the life of 76 people in Johannesburg, South Africa. The cause of the blaze, though, remained a mystery until during the inquiry into the fire, one of the survivors, Sithembiso Lawrence Mdlalose, made a startling confession. He admitted responsibility for the inferno, explaining that he had been attempting to cover up his murder of a Tanzanian drug dealer who lived in the building by pouring petrol over the corpse and burning it in the basement. The attempted cremation, though, got out of hand and the fire swiftly consumed the building, killing many of its inhabitants. Mdlalose has now been charged with 76 counts of murder and 86 counts of attempted murder. *theguardian.com, 25 Jan 2024*.

Jiangxi province in China was battered by typhoon strength winds for several days in early April, damaging more than 5,400 houses and killing seven people. Among the dead were three people from an apartment building in the provincial capital, Nanchang, who were reported to have been sucked out of their apartments' windows, complete with the mattresses on which they were sitting. The victims were a woman in her 60s along with her 11-year-old grandson, and a 60-year-old woman from another apartment in the same building. *editions.cnn.com, 5 Apr 2024*.

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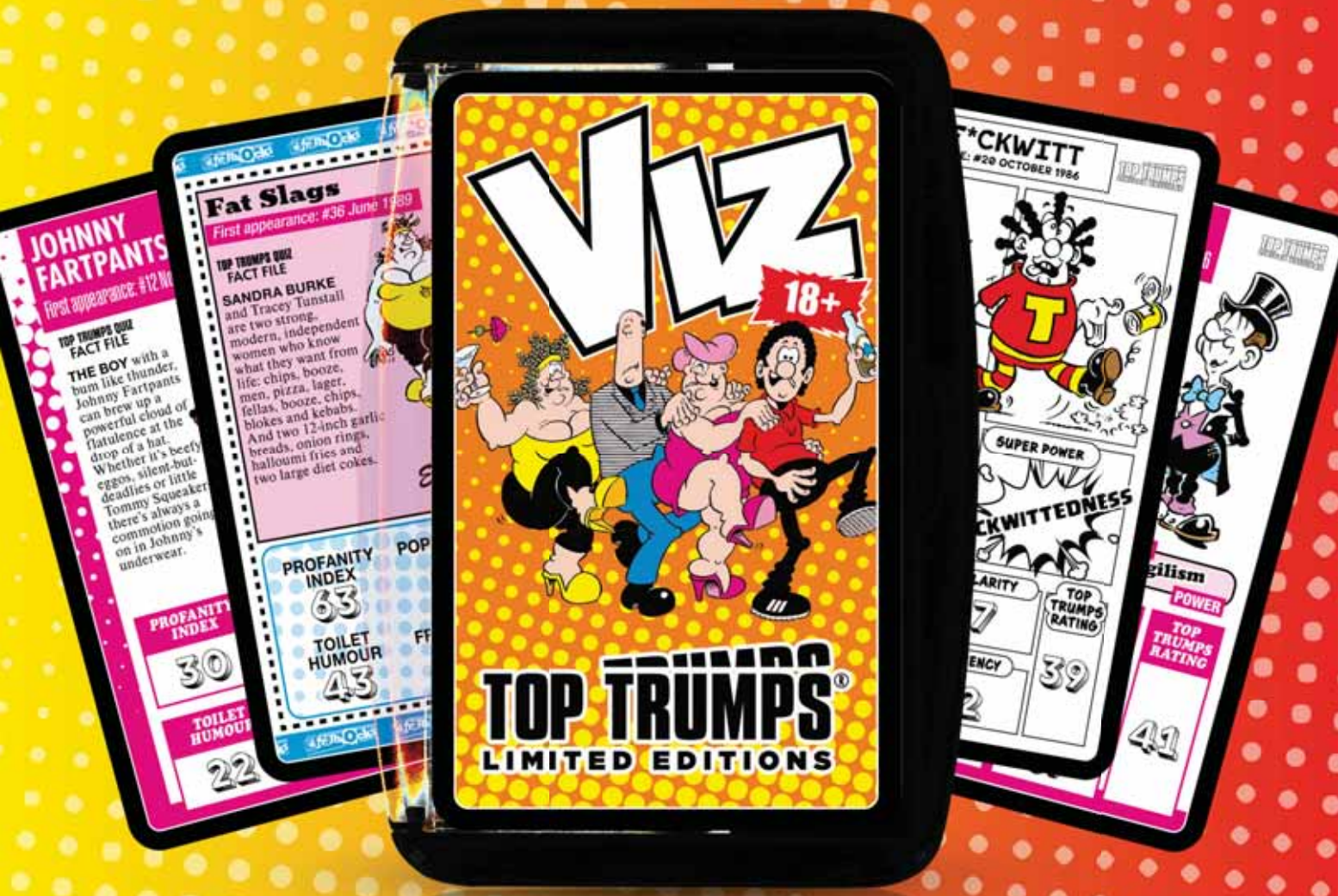

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